

VANITY

*The Confessions of
a Court Modiste*

by

RITA





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London

T. FISHER UNWIN

VANITY !

The Confessions of a Court Modiste

BY

‘RITA’

AUTHOR OF ‘PEG THE RAKE,’ ‘THE SINNER,’ ‘A HUSBAND OF
NO IMPORTANCE,’ ‘A GENDER IN SATIN,’ ‘AN OLD
ROGUE’S TRAGEDY,’ ETC., ETC.



LONDON

T. FISHER UNWIN

PATERNOSTER SQUARE

1900

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VANITY!

CHAPTER I.

WITH grave doubt I regarded it.

“Frou-Frou”

Court Modiste

That was all. My new sign. My new signature, ready to be affixed to my new premises in Bond Street.

It had to be Bond Street, whether I liked the rent or could afford it. My inability to discharge either obligation was not of much importance, I had so many things to consider just then. It was all risk, a pure speculation, but Di Abercroft had advised it, and she was one of the successful

modistes of London, and dressed all the principal actresses, who called her gowns Worth, and Paquin, and Félix, and thereby delighted and imposed on the guileless British public.

Dear public! How very guileless it is in some things, and how easily deceived, and how dearly it loves the gilt on its gingerbread. How it worships millionaires and titles, and the magnificent success of Dishonesty! It was in order to test its gullibility and prove the truth of much that cynics and wise men had said and written on the subject that I had ordered this sign upon which I was now gazing.

I stood on the bare boards of what was shortly to be my Emporium of Fashion. At present it was only furnished with this sign, and the assertion of Court Modiste was merely a playful jest on my part. I had never made a Court gown, but I meant to. I was therefore only forestalling my intentions by announcing them as a fact.

‘A good beginning is everything,’ said Di Abercroft. ‘Make a bold plunge, and the splash will attract notice. Once get noticed and you’re all right.’

So I went straight to the heart of the matter and chose my name, in itself an advertisement of purpose. For vanity lies at the root of every female heart to which I appealed. A desire to be beautiful, to be admired, envied, remarked. Oh! I knew my sex very well, and had served them a long apprenticeship since misfortune and I were 'first acquaint.' I thought of that acquaintanceship as I looked round at my empty walls, my vacant shelves and presses.

I thought of my drudgery as a daily governess, ill paid, imposed upon; forced to accept starvation pay and put up with sneers and insults. Hiding the instincts of a lady under shabby gowns, wearing cleaned gloves, and cheap boots, and home-trimmed hats.

The room before me became suddenly a picture-gallery of memories, in all of which I moved and suffered, and endured. My youth flashed out stormily—a rebellion against discipline, hardship, poverty. I loved all things beautiful and artistic. Form and colour were a delight. Circumstances forbade my interpreting them as I wished. My eyes might feast, but my heart could only envy. For youth does not love to take its joys

second-hand ; to look at love, beauty, wealth, success through other eyes while its own grow dim with bitter tears, and the Unattainable is the ever-present mirage in its dreary life-desert.

I roused myself suddenly from these reflections. I had lived through suffering, and now I was going to avenge it. The past was behind me—thank heaven for that ! I was still young—not thirty. I had a face and figure that were eminently serviceable for the purpose in view. I had worked hard at this business, both in shops and privately. I had studied its minutest details under Di Abercroft's able guidance. I had a genius for 'cut,' and an eye for colour and combination. But my capital was small, and the Semitic friend who had advanced it was not more generously disposed towards me than many of his fellows. However, he had faith in me and in Di's promised assistance. She made thousands a year, and could send me hosts of customers. The fact of my having been with her for three years was in itself an introduction, and as for the rest, audacity must win the day or—

Well, of course, there was a reverse side to

the picture, even as there was a blank side to my sign, but I had pinned my colours to the masthead of vanity, and vanity it should be by which I triumphed !

Once more I gazed at my empty showroom. I peopled it with living figures—alive with the rustle of silken skirts, perfumed flounces, gay voices. Lace, and satin, and fur, and all the dainty and useless fripperies of a woman's toilet overflowed the shelves, and were heaped on the tables and decorated the stands. Colour and beauty shone out of the now dusky twilight. Life and motion stirred briskly in the empty rooms. Orders were pouring in, business was flourishing, and I—prime mover, organiser and controller of it all—smiled gleefully as I read on all sides and on every face the one word—‘Success.’

.
A knock at the door interrupted me at this moment. I opened it to admit a tall, graceful woman, about whom the only qualifying adjective of description would be ‘distinguished.’

It was my friend Di Abercroft—the famous Mrs Abercroft, the designer and executioner of some

of the loveliest and most wonderful costumes ever seen in London drawing-rooms, or on the stage of fashionable theatres.

‘I thought I should find you here,’ she said. ‘But how dark and gloomy. Can’t you light up?’

‘The fittings aren’t here yet,’ I said. ‘You know what workmen are. But the board has come. There’s light enough to see that. What do you think of it?’

She surveyed my sign critically. Gold on white—a very good imitation of my own handwriting.

‘I never liked the name, you know,’ she said. ‘But you would have it. Still, it really looks very well and may “catch on.” People are so odd, and it’s certainly novel. One gets tired of those eternal “Marguerites,” and “Paulines,” and “Juliettes.” By the way, two of my travellers will call on you to-morrow. One is from Paris. He is an Irishman who went over to a firm there some years ago and has worked it into quite a big concern. I mention it because he’s the only one of all I employ whom it’s safe to trust. His taste is absolutely perfect, but he’s the most audacious

creature. He absolutely tells you what you are to take, and in the end I have to give in. It's no use to say "no." Fortunately he can be depended on, and the things he brings are lovely. If it weren't for that—'

She paused and laughed. 'Well, I can't wait,' she went on; 'I've a hundred things to do. When does your furniture come in?'

'To-morrow.'

'Poor thing! I pity you. What a day you'll have. You won't open for a week, of course?'

'No. I want the showroom to be quite perfect.'

'And you'll give that afternoon reception, as I advised?'

'Of course. I sent out the cards a fortnight ago.'

'They've done the decorations very well,' she said, glancing round. 'Now, be wise, and make friends of the Mammon of Unrighteousness in the shape of little Abrahams. He can do you a lot of good, or harm, as it suits him. They say half of the "smart set" are in his hands.'

'I hope he'll pass them unto mine. But tell me, Di, how long credit?'

‘Half-yearly accounts, and six months’ waiting. Charge it on, you know. And—one caution—*never* be induced to lend money to a customer. They’ll try it on. They always do. You’ve no idea how mean great ladies can be. They’ll ask for a five-pound note sometimes, and forget all about it, and then fight over a shilling in the bills. However, you’ll find all that out for yourself. By the way, I’m sending you Lady Farringdon. She wants a Court gown for the first Drawing-room, and some evening dresses. Says I’m too expensive—so I passed her on. Ask her seventy-five pounds for the Court gown. She’ll give her own lace and think it’s a bargain. Her money’s safe. Her husband’s an M.P., so he won’t have a “show up.” Your women are all right, I suppose?’

‘I hope so. Miss Jacks was at Lewis & Allenby’s, and the bodice hands are well recommended. I shall see to the fitting myself.’

‘That’s wise. Your “cut” is an inspiration. I should make that a speciality. Jacks is very good; I know her. Are you taking on Mrs Underwood?’

‘Yes. She’s such a good supervisor.’

‘Oh! she’s right enough when she’s sober. But mind there’s not a break out. I wouldn’t put up with her at last, good as she was, and Valérie sent her off at a moment’s notice.’

We were at the door now. Her little brougham, perfect in all its appointments, stood under the gaslight, waiting. A small youth, who combined the offices of ‘tiger’ and page, held the door open.

‘Can I drop you anywhere?’ she asked.

‘No, thanks. I’m going to walk and do a little shop-gazing.’

‘Well, good-bye. I wish you well over to-morrow. Let me know when you’re straight. I’ll send you over some gowns for the showroom. You must have some on view, and you can copy, with “variations,” as we say.’

The door closed. The small liveried attendant sprang up on the box. The brougham dashed off, and I closed the door of my new premises and walked slowly and thoughtfully along in the dim wintry night.

I had plenty of food for meditation. My new venture, the possibilities of failure, the quickest

and most original method of bringing myself into public notice—feminine, of course.

I gazed at the brilliantly-lit windows, loitering sometimes to admire an effective setting of some material, or the style of some Paris novelty—made in England. The best and most artistic confections are more adaptations of ‘across-the-Channel’ fashions than copies. For whether it be treason or not to say it, French taste is more eccentric than perfect, and French style is altogether too *outré* and pronounced for the true *élégante*. Myself I like the fashions of Vienna better than those of Paris, but the English modification of both is the best taste of all.

I let myself in with my key and went upstairs. My little French domestic—a veritable treasure of usefulness, ingenuity and good temper—whom I had picked up at Ostend, a matter of two or three years back, had everything ready for dinner; and although we were on the eve of flitting, the room and the table looked as cosy and inviting as she generally managed they should look.

Babette was extraordinarily interested in the new venture. She was to take all housekeeping and catering off my hands, provide meals for the work-

girls, superintend the servant I had engaged, and fulfil the duties of maid to myself when I needed her.

I knew her value and had taken her from the household drudgery of a small private hotel. For this she was absurdly grateful, and twenty pounds a year seemed to her as the wealth of Cræsus. Her skill, quickness and ability rendered her of inestimable value to me. Besides, she was trustworthy.

Over a cutlet, a sweet omelette and a half-pint bottle of claret I talked to her of the affairs of the morrow, and the prospects of the opening campaign. She was elated, very voluble, very sympathetic.

How is it one can be so much more confidential with a French servant than an English one? Perhaps because one suffers no loss of respect by so doing. Their interest is genuine, and they do not presume upon it. Of very few of our English domestics can *that* be said.

‘Madame is sure to succeed,’ she answered hopefully. ‘Oh! it is certain she will. So *gracieuse*, so *gentille* as she is, and with taste all that is of the most perfect!’

I laughed.

‘I hope my future customers will think my taste “of the most perfect,”’ I said. ‘And now, Babette, clear away these things. I don’t want any dessert, and I’m going to my room to pack up.’

CHAPTER II

WHO does not shudder at a 'move'? The early advent of vans; the persistent manner in which the men bring *first* everything you don't want and nothing that you do; the hopeless muddle; the impossibility of a seat or a meal during the whole day. The arrival of carpets after furniture instead of before. The pleasant little joke of leaving bedroom articles in the sitting-rooms, and taking what should be in the kitchen, to the attics! All this in a modified form befell me, and drove me to distraction, while men were fixing blinds and curtain poles, and laying down carpets. My premises were small and incommodious, but the frontage was good. I had, of course, to pay a ruinous price for the address.

The waiting-room was my own sitting-room as

well, and Di had advised me to make it as artistic as possible in order to produce a good impression on visitors. So valuable etchings in artistic frames hung on the pale terra-cotta walls, and tapestry screens broke up a hard square into cosy nooks where low cushioned chairs and dainty tables (destined to be littered with fashion plates and Ladies' Journals) stood in happy disorder.

The carpet was an Aubusson square of richly glowing hues, the only dash of bold colour among subdued tints. I was standing surveying the general effect after five hours' labour and misery, when Babette came to me with a card.

'Monsieur says he is of Madame Abercroft's *recommendation*. He is of Paris. It is important he see madame to-day.'

I glanced at the name.

MONS. ALPHONSE WILDASH,
Marchand et Cie.,
Paris.

This must be the French traveller Di had spoken about. I resolved to see him despite

confusion, and told Babette to bring him upstairs.

I had often interviewed travellers while serving my apprenticeship to business. As a class I did not hold them in favour.

I gave a cursory glance at the intruder and addressed him in French. He was tall, very good-looking, and had the manner and address of a gentleman, so I saw in one quick glance. Also — his hands were empty of the usual travellers' paraphernalia.

'I am only just moving in, as you see,' I observed. 'You must excuse confusion. What is it you have brought?'

'Nothing—at present,' he answered in English. I noticed as I met his eyes that they were blue, and had a sort of twinkle, or rather sparkle in them indicative of humour. They gave one rapid glance around. 'I heard you were only just establishing yourself, so I came to see what you would be likely to require.'

He drew a chair up to one of the small tables and offered it to me, and then drew a note-book from his pocket.

'As a friend of Mrs Abercroft's,' he went on,

‘you will probably model yourself on her. Myself—I should advise you to be quite original. There is nothing more difficult, but also nothing that so succeeds. Now, I thought of sending you some rather exclusive things for your showroom. They won’t be seen anywhere else, I promise you, except at our Paris establishment. Trimmings, materials, novelties of various kinds.’

‘I should like to see them first,’ I said, not caring for quite such *haut en bas* proceedings.

‘Oh! you may quite depend on me,’ he answered with a smile.

The smile was so radiant, and the even teeth so white, and the whole expression of the face at once so audacious and good-tempered and yet masterful, that I suddenly recalled Di’s words about him and wondered if I had better leave myself in his hands, even as she said.

‘In a venture like this,’ he went on, ‘the golden rule is fearlessness. You must do the best thing in the best way. You must rule your customers, not be ruled by them. Never suffer dictation, or you are lost. Believe me I have studied your

sex ever since I was thirteen years of age—studied them from a point of vantage few men possess. See how frank I am.'

He smiled again, and put away the note-book and took a chair opposite my own.

'I congratulate you on your name,' he went on. 'It is excellent, excellent! It will catch on. It means what it says. In three months' time I expect to find you flourishing. In a year you will be famous, or ought to be. Enterprise, courage, force—I read them all in your face. Are you married? Of course "Madame" may be only complimentary, as in France, but it is decidedly better.'

'I scarcely see what that has to do with your business—Mr—Mr—'

'Wildash,' he said, as I glanced at the card before me. 'Not Alphonse, or monsieur, or any of that nonsense. I have to do that for the firm, of course, but I'll be frank with you—I'm really an Irishman, by birth, and on my mother's side. I inherit a great deal of her spirit, and manner, so I'm told. She was rather a—well, a lively lady. My father didn't get on very well with her. They broke up the home—case of incompatibility of

temper, "The harp that once," and all that. I've had a lot of knocking about, but I think it hasn't done me much harm. I entered Marchand & Cie.'s place when I was quite a boy, and I've worked them up splendidly. I get a good salary now, and I like the business—especially the travelling.'

'Do you always entertain customers with your family history?' I asked drily.

He flushed a little. 'I beg your pardon. I don't know what made me tell you all this—only—'

Then I laughed outright. There was something so frank and boyish about him, I couldn't help it.

'Never mind. I've a touch of Irish blood myself.'

'I thought so. We were sympathetic directly.'

'Oh! indeed?'

'Well, I felt it, if you didn't. An Irish friendship always starts with "tracing." See how I told you all about myself.'

'I hope you don't expect me to be equally communicative?'

'Of course not. Only I should like to know your name—your real name—if you would tell me.'

‘You will be concerned only with what my sign conveys,’ I answered coldly. ‘Meanwhile I will place myself in your hands and give you a commission. In a week from now I open. Can you send me any of those novelties of which you spoke, by that time?’

‘I return to Paris to-night. I will see to it at once.’

‘And—payment?’

‘Same terms as Mrs Abercroft, if they will suit.’

‘But I haven’t an established business like her’s—your firm—’

‘My firm give me *carte blanche* to act as I think best.’

‘You believe you can trust me. I might fail—what then?’

‘You will not fail,’ he said, and his smile was positively illuminating. ‘A brow, a chin like yours never spelt failure, and your eyes are truth itself.’

I rose abruptly, annoyed at the flattery, for I disliked personalities introduced into business matters, and yet—not so ill-pleased that I could resent it on grounds of familiarity. But it was

new to me to have travellers speaking in this fashion. However, this individual was a novelty in that line, so I scarce knew whether to be amused or offended.

He took up his hat.

‘I shall see you at the end of three months,’ he said. ‘I wish you all success.’

He held out his hand—another unconventional act on the part of travellers. I gave him mine, and he ran down the stairs with an utter absence of dignity, whistling softly.

.

For a week Babette and I, with spasmodic help from the British workman, helped at arranging my new quarters. The result was eminently satisfactory, and on the afternoon of my reception I walked through waiting-room, fitting-room and showroom with well-warranted complacency.

If not as luxurious as some eminent *modistes*’ emporiums, they were all artistic, dainty and comfortable. The shelves and presses of the showroom held piles of lovely materials for the forthcoming season. Dumb models stood about, robed and garmented in exquisite gowns, and crowned with *chefs-d’œuvre* of millinery.

Every costume could be turned out perfect in every detail, with the exception of boots. Gowns, mantles, hats, furs, laces, trimmings, all were on view to-day. Sketches and original designs lay about in artistic confusion. Some of the most original had been sent by Mr Wildash, much to my surprise, and the trimmings and embroideries and *dentelles* forwarded by his firm were simply dreams of beauty and extravagance. Happy woman who could afford them!

I was consumed with momentary envy as I gazed. Three gorgeous toilettes from Di Abercroft's workrooms were *en évidence*, and I myself was gowned in turquoise blue cloth, edged and trimmed with sable and lace. I had never looked better, nor achieved a better 'fit.' My nervousness abated as I looked at my own advertisement of my capabilities, and while self-satisfaction reigned supreme, the first carriage rolled up, and a stately dame, tall, elegant, amber-haired, a modern Juno, in fact, entered the shop.

Di Abercroft followed so closely that I learnt she was Lady Farringdon almost before I had recognised a first customer.

She was a very charming woman, if a little over-

laden with social *minauderies*. She wanted a Court gown, and I listened deferentially to her ideas on the subject.

They were not mine. I studied her face and figure and possibilities, and knew instinctively what would be effective. However, this was not the occasion to assert my opinions, and I contented myself with making an appointment instead. Quite a crowd of women flocked in now. They all seemed to know one another. They chirped and gossiped, examined my various confections, tried on hats and bonnets, drank tea, and nibbled cakes and sweetmeats, professed themselves delighted with everything, asked innumerable questions, and left me with more orders than I well knew how to execute.

So far my afternoon had been a success. I had heard a good many scandals, seen many wonderful faces and figures, learnt something of great ladies' extravagances and the way debts were paid in society, had been petted or patronised according to the whim or necessity of those I promised to oblige, and was at last left to my own reflections, tired, yet elated, and ready for a confidential

chat with Di Abercroft, who had remained behind for that purpose.

Di was a perfect encyclopædia of fashionable knowledge. She never forgot a face, or a scandal. Yet she was too good-natured to rule by such means, and had a suave, gracious manner that made her a universal favourite. She was a tall, graceful blonde, with innocent blue eyes, was always wonderfully costumed, and had so large and rich and important a *clientèle* that she could have spared half and not missed them.

We withdrew into my own little sanctum when everyone had departed, and Babette brought us black coffee, chartreuse and cigarettes. Under their soothing influence Di's worldly soul unburdened itself to me, and I learnt many things that were needful, much that was shocking, and little that tended to give me a very high opinion of my own sex in general.

'By the way,' I said at last, 'that French traveller *did* call. At least he's not French but Irish. Somewhat of a character, isn't he?'

'Indeed, yes.' She laughed and lit a cigarette.

‘A dear boy and so good-looking. Quite a pet of mine. And the most perfect taste. He never makes a mistake. And he has a genius for what I call “faking”—you know—making a thing up to suit a particular requirement. Now, I’ll let you into a secret. Have you seen “The Meddlesome Girl” at the Piccadilly Theatre?’

‘No, not yet.’

‘I’ll take you. I have a box for to-morrow night. You shall see Miss Ellery’s gown. Everyone is raving about it. Hand-painted roses, natural as life, thrown in a trail over palest pink satin, low bodice, black baby-ribbon let in—exquisite. Well, my dear, she couldn’t possibly afford hand-painted satin, and she wouldn’t go into debt, and she is never “obliged” by anyone. She’s quite straight.’

‘Details *à propos*—of what?’

‘The roses. What do you think? It was Harry Wildash’s suggestion.’

‘To the Irish all things are possible,’ I said, laughing, ‘and he has a full share of his nation’s audacity.’

‘And ingenuity, you’ll grant?’

‘And artifice?’ I questioned, with a remembrance of Mrs Malaprop.

‘Perhaps something of all these. Well, Kate, don’t whisper it beyond these four walls as you value my reputation. Those roses are *cut out of chintz, and gummed on the satin.*’

CHAPTER III

I WAS still laughing over this disclosure, when Babette appeared on the scene.

She handed me a card. I took it, and then threw it across to Di. 'You'd better see her,' she advised. 'You'll have to advertise in the paper, but they'll give you an interview, and she'll do some sketches of your gowns. Myself I never bother about these people, but you're in a different line, and you'll want your Court dresses described. Ask her in and we'll see what she says for herself.'

I gave the necessary order, and Babette appeared again, announcing a gaunt-looking female with straggling wisps of hair, armed with a notebook and spectacles.

'You have called from the *Lady's Illustrated*?' I said sweetly.

‘Yes; I do the fashions for them. They thought you would like to advertise. Here is our scale of charges. If you wish I’ll take some notes of your establishment. A notice in our paper is very beneficial.’

‘I have no objection,’ I said. ‘I am sorry you did not call earlier, I had a sort of opening reception. However, if you care to have an account of it I shall be happy to give it you.’

‘You would have to take a hundred copies of the paper if I put in such a notice.’

I hesitated. ‘Is that—usual?’

‘Oh! yes. Then you would be expected to advertise half a column weekly, and my commission is two per cent. on what you expend.’

‘Very well. But you will say nice things of my establishment, won’t you?’

‘Depend upon that. Now, if you will give me a few details I’ll work up an article that will please you. A lady, of course; doing this out of enterprise—they always like that—and with a natural taste for the *modiste’s* art. . . . I quite understand. Who were at the reception? Any titles? . . . they love titles. . . . Thank you,

that will do. Now for the showroom and my sketches.'

I rose to accompany her. I rather admired the business-like way she went to work.

She took down a description of the showroom, sketched one or two models, then shut her little book and turned to me.

'That tweed,' she observed, pointing to a material on the table, 'would make a useful coat and skirt. I never wear anything fanciful—tweed in winter, linen in summer. When could you fit me?'

I was somewhat taken aback. 'Is that beside your—commission?'

'Oh! yes, it's usual. Madame Cross, Mrs Oliver, all of them do it. It's a good advertisement for you. I'll say it came from here.'

I could not help thinking that her face and figure would not be likely to advertise any gown we made her, but policy counselled politeness. I therefore merely announced my willingness to fit her gaunt frame the next afternoon, and promised the gown within a week. She nodded approvingly, held out a badly-gloved long hand, and then took her departure.

I returned to Di and the cigarettes.

‘How funny it all is!’ I said, ‘and how different when one is behind the scenes. Do you furnish the Press with costumes?’

‘Has she been levying blackmail?’ laughed Di. ‘I thought her gown was very shabby. Be sure she’s done that on her own account. They all try it on. Well, one can hardly blame them, poor souls! They get wretchedly paid, have their meals at an A. B. C. shop, and are obliged to watch any chance as keenly as a cat at a mouse-hole. Are bullied by editors, worried by the staff, hated for a success, despised for a failure. All in all, a journalist’s life is not a happy one, and there are too many in the field. They’re in one another’s way—consequently the pay is bad and the competition enormous. We live in an age of women workers, my dear, but the age is none the better for it. The fashion papers only pander to our vanity. The society notes in the daily press are simply vulgar advertisements of notoriety. You’ll see the same names appearing day after day. Mrs “Jack” Nobody was seen driving or walking or lunching, and Lady “Tom” Somebody was exquisitely

gowned at the Duchess of Lackland's reception. Her Grace herself looked a picture, and wore some fine diamonds. I call it offensive and impertinent; I can't think why people tolerate it. To have one's name, one's face, one's gowns and jewels at the mercy of any penny-a-liner! Well, after all, my dear, there's some satisfaction in being a nobody. We escape personal indignities of that sort.'

'Those people to-day,' I observed, 'didn't seem worthy of any better fate. They simply were Mrs "Jack" this, and Mrs "Tom" that, in different gowns, but all living the same life, talking of the same things and bent on being seen at the same places.'

'Pleasure is not an inventive god. One dinner-party or one ball does not differ very much from another in glory. For my part, I think my stage *clientèle* get much more fun out of life than their sisters of the great world. No one enjoys pleasure or leisure until they know what work is. Society has only caprices.'

'Who is Lady Farringdon?' I asked presently.

'Harmless enough. Her husband is in the House. She is not in the best set, though I

believe she gets a state concert or a Marlborough House garden-party now and then. She is inclined to exaggeration. Don't let her have her own way—I mean too much colour, too many jewels, too much red and white, too much bust and too compressed a waist. She horrifies me. You will have two hours' trying on of every gown she orders, and it will take your fitter half an hour to pull in her corsets. She sits down between every tug to get her breath, and then tells you they're quite loose !'

'How foolish ! I hate to see a woman's figure like an hour-glass. Why can't they see that proportion is the true art of beauty ? Who admires an exaggerated waist ? I'm sure men don't, and no woman could—because she knows what suffering it entails, and what injury it does.'

'God knows ! It's one of the things past understanding. But why should we criticise our foolish sex, my child ? It is on their follies we flourish and make fortunes ; at least I hope you'll make a fortune. Then you can retire and live your life as seems best—or marry.'

‘I shall not do that. . . . You should know better than to advise it.’

‘Oh! I forgot that little *contretemps*. But it’s all so long ago . . . and no one knows.’

‘Isn’t it sufficient that I know, and have to suffer for it?’ I asked bitterly.

‘My dear, if I were you I wouldn’t suffer. Men aren’t worth it, believe me. They have their consolations. Why shouldn’t we have ours?’

She rose and took my hands affectionately. We were not very demonstrative as a rule, Di and I.

‘You’ll come to the theatre to-morrow?’ she asked. ‘I’ll call for you. Wear a pretty gown. Our box is well placed. Shall I ask Burke Mahoney to join us? We could have supper at the Savoy, or Cecil, if you like.’

‘Very well,’ I said. ‘It will be amusing. And as my days are likely to be busy, I may as well enjoy my evenings.’

‘Burke’s very good fun, as you know. He’s just got on a new paper—*The Cynic*. Motto—praise nothing, sneer at all things. And he’s just the very essence of good-humour and jollity.’

‘Perhaps that’s why he can write cynicisms and enjoy them. Force of contrast.’

‘Even as we enjoy the theatre because we come to it from workrooms and fripperies.’

‘And chintz roses,’ I said, laughing.

‘My dear, society is very like my chintz roses. It only requires effects, no matter how startling or bizarre. All its satin passes for hand-painted, if it’s only worn by the right person.’

.

I thought of that remark after Di had left, and the showroom was closed, and I was reflecting on the day’s experience.

‘*Worn by the right person.*’ Yes. That was the secret of social success. To be so far above the crowd that what you wore was correct, however eccentric; what you said was witty, what you did was not to be cavilled at. It must be nice to be one of the elect. To be in the right ‘set,’ and know all the right people. Never to wear that air of ‘not being in it’ which is impossible of disguise. Never to be in ignorance of the latest mode in handshakes and slang, and society shibboleth. And it looked so easy.

I had studied the world from many points of view, and, as the 'looker-on' sees most of the game, I had contrived to see a good deal, and learn more. Paris, London, the Riviera, had all played school board to my various educational standards. I was by no means meanly equipped for my battle with life and my own sex. I had little to thank them for, and I owed many a bitter grudge which I was well minded to repay if fate gave me the chance.

But to get that chance I must become a necessity; someone not easy to snub or ignore. I must rule through their worst and lowest passions. I must get to know their secrets, and use them to my own advantage. It would not be easy, perhaps, but it would be worth trying. What I had learnt in Paris, and seen in Monte Carlo, and studied in London might be of inestimable value. I knew it was a habit of great ladies to 'pet' their dressmakers, in order to have the first chance of novelty, the best attention, and be sure of getting new gowns at a few hours' notice, even in the height of the season. Besides, there were so many other little services we could render.

I went over the 'pros' and 'cons' carefully. I laid my plans, and surveyed my scheme of action. A great deal—almost everything—would depend on that first Court gown. It must be my 'sprat' thrown into the great sea where the shoals of mackerel swam and fought and crowded with persistent energy. It must bring me into notice even where all else would be noticeable. The wearer was of secondary importance in my estimation, although I knew that art would make her more than presentable. But she must be garbed in such fashion as should win instant attention, and keep it. Here was no question of costliness. It was more of *chic*, that vague, untranslatable word which means so little, yet so much.

I racked my brains. I drew designs. I could have cursed the hampering clauses of Court directions—the arbitrary rules of cut and shape and length; but yet my gown lived and took form and became a thing of exquisite beauty.

I cannot tell how or why it was that amidst my designs there suddenly flashed before me the laughing eyes of the young Irish traveller.

'I declare I will ask his opinion!' I cried

suddenly. 'I'm sure he has good taste. What he sent me for the showroom was perfect!'

Acting on the thought, I drew writing materials towards me and dashed off a hurried note to my audacious friend. I described Lady Farrington exactly—colouring, height, general style and appearance. I begged for his advice, by return of post, at the same time submitting my ideas.

Then, much relieved in mind, I rang for Babette and supper.

And so ended my first day as a professional *modiste*.

CHAPTER IV

NOTES FROM MY DIARY

Feb. 2nd.—I must jot down certain facts and episodes of my new life if I am to come to a satisfactory understanding with their results. Besides, my memory is not so good as it might be. I have resolved therefore to put down every night what happens during the day.

I shall begin with this morning and the visit of Lady Farringdon to discuss her dress for the March Drawing-room.

As I had not yet heard from Wildash I kept her off on generalities, saying that I expected marvels from Paris and would defer our decision until their arrival.

It was a very cold day, and she sat by the fire, in a long, softly-padded chair designed for com-

fort and beguilement. I began to criticise her cloth gown.

‘Yes, it is an odious thing,’ she said. ‘I’ll never go to that man again. Since the Duchess of Y—— patronised him, he’s so puffed up he doesn’t care what he gives ordinary customers. And his prices are ruinous. When I complained of this gown he said my figure was out of proportion. Did you ever hear such insolence?’

‘Your figure seems perfect,’ I said. ‘Perhaps the waist is a trifle too—too—’

‘My dear creature! not too *large*? For goodness sake don’t say that!’

‘Oh! no. . . . Just the reverse. I was about to suggest you should not lace quite so tightly.’

‘Tightly! I assure you my corsets are absolutely *loose*, and this gown slips about me. . . it’s no fit at all. Oh! don’t say I look tight-laced like Mrs Wiltshire. She boasts, you know, that she has the smallest waist of any woman in London. Of course, you know her by sight?’

‘Who does not? She makes me feel *sick*. I always think she’s going to break in half.’

‘I’m so glad you don’t admire her. It’s really

too wonderful to be—nice. They say she sleeps with a steel belt round her.’

‘What does she gain by such penance?’

‘Admiration and envy.’

‘Not from any sensible person—of that I’m sure.’

‘My dear Madame Frou-Frou, who cares about being *sensible* in society? Unless, of course, they go in for fads like Lady Glasgow, and the Duchess of Siltshire, and her set—Shetland industries and Scotch plaids and factory girls and things of that sort! They’re not in my line, thank goodness! But to return to business. Can you make me a walking dress in a couple of days?’

‘Certainly. Will you choose the material now?’

‘I may as well. What a treat it is to find someone with leisure. Now, I wonder if I could trust you to dress me without any bother on my own part? I’m not quite sure of my own taste. My husband always says I wear too gaudy colours. But Captain Calhoun—a friend of ours, a great judge of dress—says I always look a picture, so I don’t know who to believe. What would you say?’

‘I don’t like that scarlet against your hair.’

‘It *is* rather audacious—*that* was the Conduit Street people’s idea . . . to recall the waistcoat, you see.’

‘And *that* is altogether wrong. I would give you black cloth and sapphire velvet.’

‘It sounds rather nice. And I’ve lovely sables.’

‘The very thing. Toque to match, of course.’

‘Yes. Will one fitting do?’

‘I think so.’

I rang the bell, and ordered Miss Jacks to come down to take measurements.

‘Waist—twenty inches,’ she began.

I stopped. ‘That will never do, you know,’ I said. ‘Take my advice—let out to twenty-two, or three. You won’t *look* any larger, and the fit will benefit ever so much—no strain.’

She gave a sigh of relief. ‘What a sensible creature you are. How I shall bless you! But are you *sure* I won’t look clumsy?’

‘On the contrary, you will have elegance and grace as well as comfort. The way I cut my gowns makes your *actual* waist look quite one inch smaller than it is, but I insist on proportion. With your bust and hips your waist could not

look large. I'm sure you'll be satisfied when you see yourself in the gown.'

'Well, I'll trust you,' she said. 'But, mind, don't breathe to a soul what the measurement actually is! Mrs Fancourt and Lady Jocelyn are coming to you, and we are deadly rivals. If you'd make *them* let out their waists posterity would have much to thank you for!'

I smiled, and promised to do my best. Almost on the promise the two ladies in discussion were announced.

The three greeted each other as dear friends, and then commenced that shibboleth of names, expressions, hints and scandals which only the initiated may interpret.

But I was secretly elated. Lady Jocelyn ordered two gowns, and Mrs Fancourt wanted a dinner dress of ruby velvet and sable. She was a handsome brunette with large dark eyes and a bad skin. To atone for Nature's defects she had called in liberal aid from art, but in common with most Englishwomen, she made art an advertisement instead of a suggestion. The red and white were patent to the general gaze, and the curved lashes had been too liberally

darkened. I wondered her maid could have allowed her to go out so highly decorated.

I was glad when they took themselves off.

I at once set about cutting out Lady Farrington's bodice, and gave full instructions to skirt and sleeve hands as to their respective duties.

'It must be finished and delivered to-morrow night, mind, without fail. Every piece of work I promise has to be ready when promised. It is my principal rule and on no account to be broken.'

The staff acquiesced meekly, and I left them to their work.

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More customers in the afternoon. Among them an elderly dowager with a plain, attractive face. She was a very great personage and came to order a Court gown, also for the March Drawing-room.

'I have a dispensation, owing to bronchial troubles,' she informed me. 'I want it cut a very narrow square and sleeves to the elbow. It is cruel holding a Drawing-room at this time of year. Even furs and hot bottles don't keep out the cold.'

‘A velvet train, I suppose,’ I suggested. ‘I have a beautiful shade of pansy. I should suggest lining it with pale yellow, and the petticoat yellow also. Have you your own lace?’

‘Yes; my maid will bring it. Of course you’ll be very careful?’ I promised faithfully.

She moved about, examining things with evident curiosity.

‘What is your real name?’ she asked at length. ‘Of course Frou-Frou is only for business?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Costello is my name—Mrs Costello.’

‘A widow?’ she inquired.

‘Yes,’ I said briefly.

Seeing I was not inclined to be communicative, she confined herself to instructions and orders, until I was weary.

I took half an hour’s rest before dressing for the theatre. I was wise enough to know that neither cosmetics, paint, nor washes are half as good a remedy for fatigue as Nature’s restorative. A douche of cold water when I arose made me feel as fresh as ever.

Di's brougham was at the door at half-past seven, and she ran upstairs to see me and hear the news of the day.

She opened her eyes when she heard of *two* Court gowns. She knew my old dowager very well. 'A dear, unsophisticated old thing,' she described her. 'Always administering charities and going to missions. But not an idea about dress, and will wear her hair like Mrs Gladstone. I've seen her feathers hanging over her nose and she smiling in serene unconsciousness. She's going to present a daughter or niece, I believe, otherwise she avoids Drawing-rooms. What made her come to you?'

'I don't know. She didn't say.'

'She's an excellent customer and has any amount of influence. . . . So you've had a busy day. You look none the worse for it. What it is to be young!'

She sighed and glanced at herself. Di is forty, so she allows. She was wearing black velvet, with a great deal of jet, and one large pink rose nestled in the lace at her breast. She was still a very handsome woman, but her *première jeunesse* was over.

‘You think I’ll do?’ I questioned, glancing at the shell-pink gleams of my lovely satin as it shone through creamy tints of lace and chiffon.

‘As if you weren’t woman enough and artist enough to know that yourself!’ she answered. ‘If I weren’t fond of you I’d be envious. Tell me, is that ripple in your hair—natural?’

‘Perfectly. When it’s undone it all curls.’

‘Enviably woman! Take care of yourself, my dear. Those charms don’t last for ever. . . . And now we’d better start. I suppose it will take ten minutes to get to the theatre?’

I gathered up fan and gloves, and she threw my cloak over my shoulders.

‘There are our men,’ she informed me as the carriage drew up before the entrance.

I was conscious of a tall figure and a short one advancing to meet us. There was a hurried introduction. Then we moved off to our box. The curtain was just rising, and all the house was in darkness as we took our seats. I turned my attention to the stage, and was soon absorbed. Not till the curtain fell did I bestow any notice on my companions.

Then I glanced back and saw Burke Mahoney's blue eyes watching me. So this was the cynic, I thought, and proceeded to test his conversational powers.

‘What do you think of the piece?’ I asked.

‘It is like a hundred others I’ve seen. English art is only copy, or adaptation. There’s no originality in it.’

‘That is quite a critic’s phrase,’ I said. ‘The question is, What *is* originality? A dramatist can only play on the time-worn strings of love, jealousy, hate, revenge. And I’m sure the audience wouldn’t understand anything else—at a theatre.’

‘They’re not given the chance. No one takes the trouble of educating them. A play that is execrable from the point of art has been drawing full houses for the last three months simply because the hero dashes on the stage on a real horse! And when the horse once gave a genuine kick, not set down in his part, how the “gods” howled and yelled with delight.’

‘But that proves my argument. They want only what they can understand. It would be a long and thankless task to train them to new

appreciation. Ibsen and the Independent Theatre don't pay.'

'No. The destruction of art is the public's joy. They always hail the blot on the picture with enthusiasm—I suppose because they *can* understand that. Popular tunes are a success, but they're not music, and popular plays are not art, and popular books are not literature. The British public is a dull ass who loves to have his ears tickled. In reality they should be flayed with nettles.'

He said all this in a rich, melodious voice, and his face was as grave as a clergyman's over his sermon.

I wondered if he really meant it.

'You write, don't you?' I asked.

'I do. It's a sorry business—journalism; and what is good in it women are doing their best to destroy. They worry editors, vulgarise interviews, turn news into a hash of personalities, attempt to criticise what they don't understand, and take miserable pay, and put up with any amount of insults for the honour of airing "I'm on such and such a journal."'

'How very hard you are on women.'

‘Because I like them in their own place—home, or society, or scenes of amusement. But when it comes to elbowing them in Fleet Street, listening to their wretched type-clicking in every place of business one goes to, crowding with them for “outside” places on ’buses in summer, and fighting for an inside one in winter—faugh!’

‘You are no true son of Erin,’ I observed. ‘They are nothing if not chivalrous.’

‘One can be chivalrous to the right woman,’ he answered, and so eloquent a glance swept over my face that I was well assured he had no fault to find with this particular ornament to her sex.

Then the curtain went up once more and our talk ended for a time.

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The supper was a great success. Burke Mahoney and I became great friends. When he learnt I too claimed Irish descent, he dropped much of his cynicism and became a natural, genial human being. He showed great interest in what he called ‘my little venture.’

I could see, however, that he was less hopeful than Wildash. Perhaps he knew more of Jews

and money-lenders, and the disastrous results of high interest on borrowed capital. However, I was in too good spirits to look upon affairs in anything but a hopeful frame of mind, and lobster salad, chicken cutlets and champagne had never seemed so enjoyable.

Di flirted discreetly with her little man, who seemed to know all the social celebrities by sight and pointed out several 'emancipated' beauties supping with kindred souls, while their husbands were otherwise engaged. Also various husbands enjoying themselves with companions more noted for amiability than strict propriety.

It was all very amusing, if not exactly moral. Burke Mahoney declared he was furnished with various spicy 'pars' for his society column—where he only mentioned people by initials, and skimmed the thin ice of probable divorce scandals in a manner as ingenious as it was cruel.

'I could gibbet them as high as Haman did I please,' he said once. And there was something in his face and voice so hard and pitiless that it set me wondering what private wrong was lending bitterness to the sting of his wit, and souring a natural good temper.

CHAPTER V

Feb. 5th.—A letter from Wildash this morning.

He entered fully into the subject of 'ultra-chic,' and sent me some designs of his own. One was so exquisite I felt sorry our own lovely and exclusive Princess could not see it. She is an authority on the art of dressing and a notable example of good taste. However, it would be a satisfaction to know that her eyes would rest upon this *chef-d'œuvre*, and perhaps approve it.

I made an estimate of the cost of this gown and found it far exceeded my limit. But I was about to stake future reputation and success.

could not stick at trifles. It should be made and executed, and Lady Farringdon must please herself as to remuneration over and above the

specified price. I worked hard as the time drew near. Every stitch of that gown was under my supervision.

It was a dream of beauty—a shimmering mass of silver and lace, and the richest pearl-hued satin. The train fell from both shoulders, and was cut open to the waist to show the contour of the figure. I knew my Juno's Titian head and beautiful skin would carry it off magnificently.

On the appointed day I myself went to dress her. She was somewhat tired and cross, having had to rise at eight in order to have her hair dressed. When I arrived her maid was removing the camelline from her throat and neck previous to polishing the skin with chamois leather. Her face was not yet made up. I had entreated her to leave that to me.

'Fancy having to pickle oneself like this at such a time of day,' she said pettishly. 'And who could look anyway decent facing a March wind, and all one's skin going into goose-flesh! And oh! my dear creature, did you think of the bouquet? It hasn't come yet.'

'I brought it myself on the way,' I answered

quietly, as I turned to the dressing-table for the 'make-up.'

The maid, a somewhat supercilious French damsel, watched me critically.

'Madame looks too pale for all that white,' she observed.

'Not at all,' I answered. 'You must always allow for a natural touch of colour coming up. Heat, excitement, crowd, all will have their effect. If she goes in like a peony she will come out like a poppy. That faint blush-rose is exquisite. And if it deepens it will only be more becoming.'

'Let me see,' said miladi herself, and studied her face critically in a hand-glass.

'You are right,' she said gratefully. 'I am a perfect work of art, I know, but, at least, it *is* art. Félicie always overpaints me. I look like a dairy-maid generally. How beautifully you have done it. Now—will it last? Mind there's five weary hours still before me?'

'You needn't be afraid,' I said, and then we turned our attention to other matters.

Heavens! What a business that toilet was! I'm thankful it will never be my fate to attend a Drawing-room. The innumerable details—

from feathers to shoe-buckles. The arranging of dress and train, and jewels, and lace. The weary hours, the inevitable fatigue even before the long, slow drive, and longer waiting, to be succeeded by fight and push and struggle for the barriers. Well—let us hope the game is worth the candle of energies, animosities, and indignities, burnt at the playing of it !

My 'work of art' looked wonderfully lovely when finished. Her tall, full figure showed to its best in this semi-regal attire of flowing train and waving plumes. Her skin shone like polished marble under its glittering pendant of pearls and diamonds. A faint flush of excitement gave her face quite a natural tint, her large violet-blue eyes sparkled under their carefully-darkened lashes, and her full scarlet lips gave warmth and colour to the whole countenance.

She was eminently satisfied with herself, and made me come downstairs to be introduced to her husband. He was a mild, inoffensive person, twenty years older than herself, who was supposed to be of great service to his 'party.' His title was comparatively new, and his great grief

was that he had no son on whom it might devolve.

With him was the 'family friend' Lady Farrington had mentioned—Captain Calhoun — a strikingly handsome man with that languid air of boredom which society deems well-bred. Close upon our heels was announced a certain Lady Henley, who was to accompany 'Juno' to the Drawing-room. She made an admirable foil to my work. She was short and stout. Her dress was black velvet and purple satin, and she carried an inartistic mass of purple orchids.

'I never saw you look so well! What a gown!' she exclaimed half enviously.

'It will be hard to beat you, Cissie,' murmured Captain Calhoun, pulling his moustache and surveying her with languidly approving eyes.

'Who made it?' asked Lady Henley, putting up long-handled glasses and staring critically at the toilette.

'Behold the artiste,' smiled Lady Farrington, turning to me. 'Madame Frou-Frou *is* an artiste,' she went on; 'a lady who is devoting her talents to the benefit of her fellow-creatures. You must visit her studio—it is really *that*.

She has the most exquisite things in London, and, what is better, knows how to employ them.'

'I shall certainly pay you a visit,' said Lady Henley, with a discontented glance at her own heavy and unbecoming gown.

'Jones & Allison did me, and they are most dictatorial. One can't say a word—and so horribly dear—not that one minds paying when the result is satisfactory; but *this*—' She took up her heavy train bordered with funereal feathers. 'Now, *does* it suit me, I ask you?'

'Certainly not. Too heavy, and too dark,' I said frankly. 'The satin should have been of lighter violet, and the train lined with it.'

'Ah! I see you understand. You shall make my next gown if I ever go again. I always declare I won't, till they hold them at a civilised hour, and a decent time of the year. There's a fog creeping up now enough to choke one. It's all very well for Her Majesty, who has only to move from one room to another, but if she had a long, cold drive, and a dreary wait in weather like this, I wonder what she'd think of Drawing-rooms!'

‘Is it time to be off?’ asked Lady Farrington, with a glance at the clock.

‘I’m afraid it is,’ announced Captain Calhoun, taking up a wrap lined with white fox fur and carefully enshrouding her lovely shoulders.

‘You’ll be here to tea? A lot of other peacocks are coming in?’ she asked him.

I noticed a glance, a whisper, which let me somewhat ‘behind the scenes.’ Then he assured her languidly he would try to come if he could get away from some duty or other.

The two women gathered up their trains, gave an envious glance at the warm comfort of the room they left behind them, and passed through the hall and down the crimson-carpeted steps to the waiting carriage. The door banged, a crowd of butcher-boys and nursemaids gazed enviously after it. Then I turned away from the window and asked if a hansom might be called for me.

‘Won’t you have a glass of wine, a sandwich, or something?’ asked Sir John, fussily. ‘You’ve been here hours, and had no luncheon. Everything is topsy-turvy on these Court days.’

I accepted the wine and a biscuit, for I was really tired and faint, and the old baronet trotted

about and opened the sideboard himself, and made himself needlessly fussy over my comfort. Captain Calhoun stood by, watching me out of a pair of sleepy brown eyes.

‘I say, are you really a dressmaker?’ he asked, dropping into a chair beside me. ‘You don’t look it, you know; as tip-top as any of ’em. But women do such extraordinary things nowadays.’

I laughed. ‘Yes, I’m in very good company,’ I said. ‘There’s a countess and a duchess in the same street, and a “smart” tea-shop kept by a well-known society woman opposite to me. Only I’m afraid philanthropy is less my master than necessity.’

‘Awh! shouldn’t have thought so. Well, anything I can do, I will. Know heaps of women, you see, and they’ll all flock if one leads the way. But Lady Farrington is a first-rate advertisement, and you’ve turned her out in first-rate style, too. I must say that.’

‘I’m very pleased you approve,’ I said demurely. ‘Naturally one values a man’s opinion on such a subject. But I thought you would have liked more colour, more show.’

‘I? Hate it—hate it, I assure you. She’s a

bit too fond of showy things herself. If you'll tone her down you'll win my lasting gratitude.'

I wondered which I was to believe—her declaration that he approved her taste, or his that he was offended by its somewhat daring fantasies.

I foresaw I was to learn a great deal while I dressed great ladies.

CHAPTER VI

THE March Drawing-room brought me in as much work as I could possibly desire. Strange to say, two of the leading fashion papers gave a full-page illustration of my two gowns, and voted Lady Farrington's the most *chic* and tasteful worn on that occasion.

She told me the Princess had murmured 'exquisite,' as she bent before her gracious loveliness, and after that I looked for Fortune and Fame with eager hope. If only cheques had poured in as lavishly as orders I should have been quite contented, but while I had to be constantly handing out ready money for weekly wages, for materials, or trimmings at big shops, for rent and taxes and repairs, and the thousand-and-one expenses of my establishment, none came in to me, and Abraham's rate of interest was very high.

(The entries in my diary are somewhat alarm-

ing, but Di assures me this is only the usual experience of a first year. I shall be smoothly floated ere another comes round. I will not take these entries in detail. Only use them as I have need.)

One of them brings me to a somewhat awkward occurrence. It happened shortly after that eventful Drawing-room. If I had a late 'fitting' or appointment I always ordered tea to be brought up to the room where my customers waited, or were received.

About five o'clock one dull afternoon, Lady Farrington arrived. She was accompanied by Captain Calhoun, and they were both shown up into the waiting-room by the page boy. I was in the workroom at the time, and I suppose five or ten minutes must have elapsed before I went downstairs.

As I entered he was speaking very earnestly. He was standing by the fireplace. She was lying back in her favourite low chair. The room was all dusk and shadowy, lighted only by fire gleams, and fragrant with the scents of hyacinth and narcissi which filled vases and flower bowls in every available nook.

‘Ask her,’ the Captain was saying. ‘You may be sure she has her price like the rest of ’em.’

I approached, and there was an embarrassed silence. I thought they must have been speaking of me. But serene unconsciousness was in my expression and accent.

‘You are all in the dark!’ I exclaimed, and touched the button of the electric light. Rosy warmth flooded the room immediately, and ‘Juno’s’ ruddy hair and rich tints shone from out that harmonious background with quite enchanting charm.

‘You will have some tea, won’t you?’ I urged.

‘How well you do things, Mrs Costello,’ drawled the Captain. ‘I was just saying I had never seen such a charming room. No wonder your visitors like dropping in. Lady Farrington declares she positively lives here!’

I laughed. ‘Have you come on business to-day?’ I inquired.

‘Yes, I want another gown,’ she answered.

I turned towards the tea-table. In my heart I wished she would pay—even something on account for those she had had. But I could

not imperil my reputation by seeming to *want* money. I brought her some tea, and Captain Calhoun handed her cakes and wafers of bread and butter, remarking that he never touched anything before dinner except a sherry and bitters, or a cigar.

In glancing at my diary, I discover here an entry—‘*Chartreuse.*’

I remember now that that same evening a case of various liqueurs arrived for me, enclosing a card with ‘Captain Calhoun’s compliments.’

On subsequent occasions, when ladies were accompanied by friends of the male persuasion, I had liqueurs brought in, as well as tea.

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From my diary.

July 18th.—The season is nearly over and I have had my hands full with orders. So far ‘Frou-Frou’ has caught on. But, alas! Frou-Frou’s finances are in a deplorable condition. This morning there arrived to me an American millionairess. Everything about her spelt ‘dollars,’ and everything he said glorified them. I heard more about oil springs, mines, railway

contracts and cattle exporting than I had ever dreamt of in the whole course of my existence.

She was a big, heavy person with grey hair carefully *coiffured*, and a lovely young daughter who had been introduced at the last Drawing-room of the season, owing to the unlimited influence of the aforesaid dollars. She told me so much of her family history, position and ambitions that I was fairly bewildered.

‘I’m not quite happy in my mind,’ she observed to me. ‘I’ve a notion I came over a bit too late for the season and got fixed in a wrong set. Our Consul did his best, but Josephine swears that old Lady Fitzduff, who introduced her, was only a scheming old adventuress, and that everyone “in the know” guesses it was a mere matter of dollars. My! you should have heard that girl give your British Court away! I just screamed and so did her father. She asked a real duchess at the Drawing-room why the Queen didn’t contract with Gunter for ices. She knew he’d do ’em for threepence a head, just to get into the Palace, and she spotted ever so many holes in the damask, and gilt off the chairs, and swore half the diamonds were paste. My husband is next

richest man to Vanderbilt—he is *so*—and the States knows it. Anyone in Amurrcra would tell you that Mark Aurelius B. Peck is just a four-horse concern and no pumpkins! And at our ball (we live in Grosvenor Square, you know), well, though the Prince *couldn't* come, his brother did, and some of his relations by marriage, and didn't they open their eyes at the cotillon presents—thirty thousand dollars went in them alone. We can show you folks how to do a thing, you bet!’

‘Do you happen to want any gowns?’ I asked somewhat brusquely.

‘I guess I do. You dress Lady Farrington, don't you?’

‘I have that pleasure.’

‘I was told so. They say, next to your Princess, she's the best - dressed woman in London. She's certainly stylish. She told me to come to you. I've tried Jay, and Russell & Allen, and Kate Reilly, and Mrs Abercroft, and now I'm going to see what you can do. You can have cash down if you like, but I must have my say, and as for trimmings, wal, I do like them sumptuous. Now, I want

a dinner-gown—white satin ; a reception one—orange and black ; orange suits me real smart—and two for Cowes Regatta, and hats to match. Then, there's my daughter Josephine—'

In the pause that followed, I heard the velvet curtains behind me swept back. Someone entered and put me aside with an air of authority.

'Pardon me, madam, did I hear you say you required some dresses?'

I looked at the intruder with astonishment. It was Wildash.

'I guess you did, young man,' answered my new customer. 'Say, are you in this business too? You look smart set up enough.'

'My appearance has nothing to do with the present question,' he answered haughtily. 'I came in to say that this establishment is conducted on very different lines to what you imagine. We do not allow our customers to dictate to *us* what they will or will not have. We cannot imperil our reputation by their bad taste or ignorance. If you wish us to dress you, we will do so, but you must have absolutely no voice in the matter.'

If Mrs Mark Aurelius B. Peck's astonishment

was half as great as my own, it would have been hard to beat.

‘I—I beg your pardon, sir, but I thought it was only people like Worth and Félix who had the authority—’

‘Madam, I am a far greater authority than Messieurs Worth or Félix. I am the designer of costumes worn by empresses and queens. I dictate—what these people carry out. I have been too much occupied with my Paris business to attend to this London one as I should wish, but I am about to concentrate my energies on it now.’

He glanced at me and gave me a significant flash of his audacious blue eyes. I was too amazed to do more than stand listening to the discussion.

He took out his watch.

‘Ten minutes is all I can spare you, madam. How many gowns do you wish to order?’

‘Four,’ she faltered, and enumerated them again.

He took out a note-book and jotted some items hastily down.

‘One reception, one dinner, two for Cowes. Nothing for Goodwood?’

‘No-o, sir,’ she stammered, all her bounce and consequence effectually quenched.

‘Thank you. Then will you walk across the room?’

She was much too nervous and upset to do this with any sort of ease, and when she turned he shook his head mournfully.

‘Your figure is impossible, but, of course, you know your own defects. I need not describe them. We can only do the best possible. Your waist is ridiculously pinched. You must go to our *corsetière*. I will give you her address. Let her measure you for our Patent Irrational Corset. As for the materials, I think you had a preference for white satin. That is out of the question. No, pray don’t interrupt’—he held up a peremptory hand—‘my time is valuable. Black satin is what you must wear—black slashed with orange, as you have a preference for that colour. For Cowes navy-blue, and black and white. Dinner—black lace and diamonds. Of course you have diamonds?’

‘Diamonds!’ she bridled. ‘Wal, now, that’s a joke, and my husband a millionaire.’

‘I suppose that means you’d have them as big

as paving-stones if you could bear the weight. I'll call and see what you must wear with this black lace. One touch of colour—no more, if your life depended on it.'

He closed the note-book.

'Cash is our rule for a first order. Two hundred guineas for the reception gown, seventy-eight for the lace dinner dress, fifty guineas each for the Cowes costumes, including hats and sunshades. Thank you, madam. Madame Costello will arrange a morning to fit you, but not till *after* your visit to Mademoiselle Juliette, our *corsetière*.'

He went to the door and opened it.

'Wrothesay,' he called, 'show this lady to her carriage.'

And with a bow that held the grace of a courtier he ushered the amazed millionairess out of the room.

As the door closed I sank down in the nearest chair.

'What on earth,' I gasped—

He broke into sudden laughter. 'I'm afraid I astonished you—allow me to explain.'

CHAPTER VII

HE glanced round the room, drew the *portières*, then came back and took a chair.

‘Dear Mrs Costello, I know I ought to apologise, but I couldn’t stand hearing that vulgar person bully you. If you want your business to be a supreme success, you must take the high hand with your customers—reduce them to powder, so to speak. A woman will bully her husband, torment her lover, insult her inferiors, snub or betray her friends, but she will lick the dust off her dressmaker’s shoes in order to procure an original gown, or be pronounced the best-dressed woman of her set. It is ignoble, but then, your society dame has no fine feelings. The world is her god, and the world exacts the lowest form of homage. But

now to business. . . . I have left Marchand et Cie. for good. They refused to raise my salary, and I have simply *made* their business—made it. *Canaille!* . . . They will soon find their mistake, so I returned to London in order to’—he looked slightly embarrassed—‘well, you’re a woman of the world, Mrs Costello. I came across a very clever little *corsetière* in Paris and I thought I’d set her up *here*. I remembered you at once and resolved to combine the two businesses. It will do you no harm, and be of inestimable benefit to her.’

‘You seem to take a great deal for granted, Mr Wildash,’ I interrupted.

‘Yes,’ he agreed smilingly, ‘I do. That is how I get on so well. “*L’audace, et toujours l’audace*”—you know that saying? It has been my motto since I was sixteen years old. I’m only twenty-six now—so I’ve not done so badly.’

‘But all this—’

‘Exactly. All this doesn’t explain why I took upon myself to interfere with your “American claimant.” But you’ll soon know my reason. I correspond constantly with Mrs Abercroft. Indeed, I furnish her with many

of her most original ideas. I heard from her that you were getting on well—but not so well as you ought. Also, that you were troubled about money matters. An idea struck me at once. You want a man at your back!’

‘A man?’ I echoed.

‘A man like myself,’ he repeated, ‘with experience, insight, artistic faculties, and what you lack—supreme impudence. People say money rules the world, Mrs Costello—not a bit of it—impudence—impudence of speech—of manner—of mind. Give me a chance of showing what I mean, and if your business doesn’t become the greatest in London, my name isn’t Harry Wildash.’

‘Do you think my customers will stand being spoken to as you spoke to Mrs Peck?’

‘They’ll have to stand it if they want our dresses. And they’ll *have* to want them.’

‘But suppose they don’t?’

‘Altogether impossible. I’d stake my reputation on it.’

But I still argued. It looked too audacious a scheme to enter upon in my present financial crisis.

‘Will you give me a trial?’ he asked persuasively. ‘The season’s almost over. But they’ll be coming to you for sea-side gowns and country house visiting affairs. I’ll be bound I’ll set them talking, and when the autumn orders come in, you’ll see if I haven’t proved my words.’

His eyes were as persuasive as his tongue. And it is always dangerous for a woman to parley with temptation. There was a certain amount of temptation in his offer, if only for the amusement to be got out of it and his own bright, audacious companionship. So, after some more talking and hesitating, I finally consented.

He was to attend every day from eleven till six; interview customers and arrange orders. I was to be comparatively passive, save in the matter of cutting and fitting—‘And the *parvenus* must pay cash down,’ he insisted. ‘Oh! I know the objection, and half the smart people can’t pay; but they’ll find the money quick enough when it’s *the thing* to have their gowns from you. You shall be to London what Worth was to Paris. Why, queens and princesses and

all the great ladies of Europe fairly trembled at his word, and obeyed him like slaves, not because his taste was infallibly good (some of his creations were odious), but because he had the genius of audacity. He cared nothing whom he offended ; no king was more dictatorial. He was the autocrat of Fashion, and Fashion rules Woman, and Woman rules the world.'

'I thought it was men?'

'We have changed all that,' he said airily. 'Your sex is the salt of the earth. You rule the Court, the Boudoir, the Laws and the Literature, the Art and Religion of the country. But you are also ruled by one god, and that is Fashion. It is a foolish god ; its feet are clay and its head a bladder, but its hands are of steel, and never loosen their grip on its feminine idolaters.'

'You seem to have studied the subject.'

'I have studied little else. There are some things women do infinitely better than men, but there are others that men do infinitely better than women—when they take the trouble. And one of these things is the treating of dress as a fine art. Studying colour, form, design, style. I have done it. But I don't understand

the A B C of dressmaking, and I couldn't cut a gown to save my life.'

'Do you propose to give me the benefit of your knowledge as a partner in the business, or what?'

'I should naturally expect a fair share of the profits,' he said modestly. 'But I'll make a conditional arrangement—twenty-five per cent. on the first year's takings—thirty the second—if my scheme succeeds, which I'm sure it will. Do you agree?'

'Yes,' I said. 'It's a risk, but if I go on as I'm going I shall certainly fail.'

'Take the risk then,' he said, with that bright smile flashing from eyes and lips. 'I'll be here to-morrow—ten o'clock—I want to arrange this room differently—you don't mind?'

'Oh! dear no,' I said, with a sensation of helplessness. 'You may as well do anything you like while you *are* here.'

'You say that as if you considered the arrangement a very temporary one.'

'It depends on how the people like being ordered and controlled.'

'My dear child—'

I laughed.

‘Oh! you mustn’t mind. That’s my Irish way. What was I going to say? . . . Oh! They *like* it, I assure you—women, I mean. They were intended to be ruled although they affirm the contrary. Of course I sha’n’t treat them all as I did Mrs Julius Cæsar—what was her name? Well, no matter—Americans always have a dozen or so. You can trust me to rule with discretion—but it must be *rule*—mind that. And now I’ve taken up your time long enough—I’ll be going.’

‘About those dresses?’ I asked, rising also. ‘It’s very easy to say blue serge, and black braiding, but are you not going to give me a sketch of the costume?’

‘Yes—I’ll do a design in rough. You’ll catch my meaning, I know. A great tub of a woman like that wants careful dressing. Great Scot! she *ought* to pay. Think of the trouble of making her look any way presentable. As shapeless as a feather-bed, and a face like a full moon with a sick headache.’

‘Well for her she can’t hear you,’ I said, laughing.

‘Indeed, Mrs Costello, if women heard *half* of

what men say about them in clubs and smoking-rooms, they'd have a good lot of conceit knocked out of them. Do they suppose we like to see them half naked at balls, or romping through cotillions, or smoking with us after dinner, or aping our dress, our manners and our slang? They think it smart and *chic*—but we call it—something very different. The cocotte of society is no less objectionable to any decent man than her sister of the pavement—only she is infinitely more expensive, and has a knack of landing you in the divorce court.'

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After he had left I sat for long brooding over this new scheme. I counted its possibilities and its dangers. I felt sure that if it was to succeed, this audacious young Irishman would be the author of such success. I could not put much heart into the matter. I was not by nature a bully, and shrank from playing the part—even at second hand. But necessity is a hard task-master, and necessity drove me to accept Harry Wildash's proposal.

He probably knew society better than I did—at least from a French point of view. French

women are apt to be confidential to their tailors and *modistes*, and other appendages. They look upon them as indifferently as they look at their furniture. They are necessities, but necessities brainless and without fine feeling. Having studied in such a school, it remained to be seen whether the lessons would bear fruit if tried in another country, and on other pupils.

Ten o'clock next morning brought my new partner in professional attire of frock coat, black satin tie, and patent leather boots. Handsome, alert, well groomed, he was a pleasant as well as an inspiring figure in the foreground of my establishment. As early as eleven o'clock Lady Farrington arrived. She had also come about Cowes dresses.

I introduced Wildash and explained the situation. He studied her approvingly.

'There will be some credit in making for you,' he observed. Then—less dictatorially, but with the most perfect confidence—he proceeded to order her dresses for her as he had done with Mrs Peck. She seemed surprised, and cast inquiring glances at me. But I was passive—simply making notes of what Wildash decided.

As she was leaving, he suddenly observed, 'By-the-bye, madam, permit me to say that, in the interests of my partner and self, all this season's accounts must be settled by end of the month. We are going to conduct the business on a more important and exclusive footing. Naturally, alterations will be attended with considerable expense. I have been looking over the books and find that your account is a very heavy one. Since February you have had various costumes—including a Court gown. The account will be sent you before we undertake your present order.'

She coloured under her paint and powder. 'I know I must owe you an immense sum,' she said to me. 'But it will be all right. I'll send you a cheque at once, and'—she stopped—'What an exquisite gown!' she exclaimed, glancing at one of the stands. 'Is it ordered?'

'Yes, madam. It is for the Princess Olga—daughter of Prince Malakoff. I used to design her gowns in Paris. She will be dressed entirely by our firm in London now.'

'The Princess Olga!' She looked at him

appealingly. 'Oh! no wonder it's so lovely. What would you charge to copy it for me?'

'I make it a rule never to copy. I could arrange a modified version of it for ninety-five guineas. But, excuse my saying so, it really would not suit your style. The princess is *petite*. You are built on grand lines.'

She smiled graciously. 'I think she has the advantage, unless you can design me something as effective and original.'

'I shall do so with pleasure,' he said, and then bowed and withdrew.

She turned eagerly to me. 'My dear creature, what an extraordinary idea! I am more than surprised! But he is charming—do you think it will work?'

'I hope so,' I answered. 'It has been rather hard on me to do everything. He is very clever, and his taste simply perfect. By-the-bye,' I went on carelessly, 'I had a visit yesterday from that new American millionairess, Mrs Peck.'

'Not Mrs Aurelius B. Peck?' she exclaimed.

'Yes; I am to dress her and her daughter.'

'Then, my dear, you *are* in luck. Why, she absolutely rolls in money. Her toilet things are

all set in gold, and she has an umbrella with her monogram in diamonds on the handle! And she's getting her dresses from *you*?'

'Yes; Mr Wildash is to design them. I must tell you of a very pretty compliment she paid you by the way. She said that next to the Princess you were the best-dressed woman in London!'

'Really!'

Never did blush more becoming rise to the cheek of a girl at some lover's flattery, than the rose that mantled the cheek of this seasoned woman of society.

.

That evening a cheque arrived paying her account in full. Oh! vanity, vanity! Truly thou art the prime ruler of every feminine heart!

CHAPTER VIII

MRS AURELIUS B. PECK arrived in due course, having had her figure arranged by Mademoiselle Juliette, the little Parisian corset maker.

She had done all that was possible, but that is not saying much. The good lady was laced so tightly she could scarcely breathe, her neck was hung with chains and locketts, and her large fat hands were covered with rings. Wherever a jewel could be stuck there glittered pin or brooch of some sort. Gold bangles circled her wrists, and gold buckles shone on her patent leather shoes. I gazed at her with a sense of hopelessness while awaiting Wildash's appearance.

'My daughter was to meet me here,' she observed. 'Ain't she come?'

'No. Perhaps she will look in later. Your

designs are ready, madam, and I will have your measurements taken presently.'

I sounded the silver gong; and Wildash appeared.

He frowned as he surveyed the large, ungraceful figure before him, and I saw her turn pale as she watched his face.

For a moment there was absolute silence. Then with a sigh he turned to me.

'We must do the best we can,' he said in French. 'When one arrives at *that*—it is hopeless.'

I rang for Miss Jacks. At the same moment the door opened, and there came in a small, slim girl with a lovely, mutinous face, and sparkling eyes.

'Why, mamma!' she exclaimed, 'you never do say you're first?'

'My daughter,' observed Mrs Aurelius, turning to me, and waving her hand introductionally, 'Miss Josephine Marianne B. Peck.'

'Rather many of me, isn't there?' inquired the young lady. Then her gaze rested on Wildash.

'Do say; was it you who put mamma down

so surprisingly? She told us when she got home. Didn't poppa laugh! We can't do anything with her home, you know. Not that we'd have her different anyway, but it keeps things a bit breezy at times. Still, it's her make, and Providence knows His own business best. But it *was* funny. Are you going to try your hand on me? Because I'm dead set on havin' my gowns made here.'

Wildash looked at her critically.

'Goodwood, or Cowes?' he asked.

'Oh, my! I guess we ain't good enough for your swells at the races. Though the Duke of Wharfshire *did* say he'd ask us. P'r'aps he reckoned without his duchess—she is stuck up—looks at me as if I was a scallyrag!'

'You may find here and there a soul above dollars, even amongst the English aristocracy,' observed Wildash, thoughtfully. 'Rare, I grant, but still even the worst of us have our redeeming points. Now, will you walk across the room as gracefully as those high heels permit, and I'll see what I can do for you?'

She stared, then laughed and swept him a mocking curtsy. After which she threw herself into a chair, crossed her arms behind her head,

and swung the aforesaid heels to and fro with an audacious display of open-work stocking, and silk and lace frilling.

‘Guess I’ll do *so*,’ she said. ‘I’m not mamma.’

He bowed gravely. ‘Good morning,’ he said, and crossed to the door.

She gazed blankly after him. ‘Well, I never! Here, Mr . . . I don’t know your name . . . come back. Is this the way you do business? My stars! it’s amazing funny! But don’t be so short. I’ll do what you want, though Worth didn’t ask me to *walk*. I assure you I don’t wobble.’

She drew up her slender figure, and moved slowly from end to end of the room. Wildash said nothing, but simply drew out his note-book, made a few entries, then, with a curt ‘good morning,’ left us.

Mother and daughter surveyed each other. Surprise rendered both wordless for a moment, and Miss Jack’s entrance with measuring tape and other paraphernalia kept them so while I gave the necessary directions.

‘How many gowns do you need?’ I asked Miss Peck.

‘I’ll have two for Cowes,’ she said curtly, ‘and you may fix me up another couple for evening as you’re about it. Blue and silver for one—white the other. A billowy thing with lots of chiffon. What about my waist?’

‘It is quite right,’ I said, turning to her panting parent, whom Mademoiselle Juliette appeared to have used with some cruelty.

I relieved her, and pointed out that the laces had been wrongly adjusted. When she was more at ease Miss Jacks tried on her pattern, and after making another appointment I dismissed them.

The morning was full of surprises. At least half-a-dozen new customers came in, all of whom had heard of Wildash, and were anxious to see him.

It astonished me to note the quickness with which he summed up their various characteristics. With some he was audacious, with others coldly polite, but one and all were treated as I never would have dared to treat any woman, and he still refused them any voice in the selection of their gowns.

‘You need have no fear. It will be quite correct,’ he assured them. And then followed

an avalanche of names and titles that silenced all remonstrance.

‘I never permit my dressmaker to dictate to me,’ said one prim-looking dowager who wanted gowns for an autumn house-party. ‘My taste is considered perfect. Besides, one must know one’s own style best, and it is *that* alone which gives originality to one’s toilette.’

‘I grant it, if you are sure you *do* know your own style,’ answered Wildash, coolly. ‘Judging from your present attire I should say exactly the contrary. You look stiff, angular, uncomfortable. There is no grace—no dignity about you. Why, you positively *crackle* with whalebone; and that jet corselet gives you the appearance of Boadicea going to fight the Romans.’

‘Sir!’ exclaimed the insulted dowager, becoming purple with rage.

‘I am only giving you my opinion. You are at liberty to go elsewhere if you don’t like it. Even Princess Malakoff never presumes to dictate to me. I have just finished that gown there for her. She left the whole matter in my hands.’

The dowager looked at the fairy-like beauty of the indicated gown, then at the cool, handsome

face of the designer. From these her glance travelled to her own reflection in shiny moiré and glittering jet. Buckram and whalebone crackled beneath a sigh of resignation.

She was vanquished.

The game thus begun went merrily on. All the gowns ordered were fitted and completed, and, strangest of all, *paid* for. Not in a single instance was there a failure.

Wildash had, as he asserted, a perfect genius for form and colour. Mrs Aurelius and her daughter were enchanted with their Cowes costumes. Certainly the American autocrat looked for once presentable, and the daughter so lovely that the various society papers chronicled her appearance in gushing terms. She wrote me pages on the subject of her success.

‘I guess I’m making a splash here,’ she wrote. ‘And I’m not sorry now I took your partner’s advice. That yachting gown does make some of the girls mad. There’s not such buttons in all Cowes. I went on board the Prince’s yacht to lunch. Lord Wharfinger took me. And H.R.H. was that gracious! My stars! I did feel

proud that day! The evening gowns are just too perfectly sweet for anything. I'll never believe in anyone again but you. Tell that dear man so. I'm his humble slave. Won't you have a time next season! Everyone's talking about him. They say he's a duke's son—doing this for a lark. I don't care a red cent whose son he is if he'll only keep on designing dresses for *me*.—Yours gratefully, JOSEY M. PECK.'

I showed this to Wildash that evening. He had dropped in to share my cutlet and savoury, and discuss plans for the autumn campaign. We were both going for a short holiday. He to Homburg—for ideas—so he said; and I to recruit, after the fag and toil of the hot summer, at a more primitive and less fashionable resort on the English coast.

He smiled oddly as he read the letter. 'A duke's son—well, she's a little wide of the mark. But not so very far off. I've a chance of becoming heir to a baronetcy.'

I looked up from my plate in astonishment.

'Is that true?'

'Indeed yes. There's a possible Sir Harry

Wildash at your service. Two lives—one old—one young and feeble—alone intervene. Not that I covet the prospect. I'm a Bohemian, heart and soul. I hate respectability as much as I hate the "good Christian family." You know what I mean? The people with a family Bible on a table by the window, and who wouldn't go to a theatre for any consideration, yet bally-rag the servant if she's five minutes late in the morning, or leaves a bread crumb on the carpet. Take a 'bus ride through any London suburb and you'll see them by the score. They're as common as their own red brick villas with the garden plot in front, and the plant and the Bible in the window.'

'It's a queer world,' I said.

'Indeed and it is. What's the meaning of it at all? I often wonder. And yet we're Christians and civilised, and go to church every Sunday (not that I ever do; I prefer a bicycle spin), and look for the millennium and the Day of Judgment. Lord, it's very funny, when you think of it! Now, these women who come here! Have they souls? Fancy them taken out of a world where they didn't change their gowns five times

a day, or gossip over tea and "nips" of cognac in each other's boudoirs. Where there were no scandals, no *liaisons*, no intrigues, no Paris, or Monte Carlo, no after-dinner card parties for baccarat, or bridge—no cotillons, no rivalries—. . . Great Scot! What would they do?’

I leant back in my chair and studied his face with some amusement.

‘I give it up,’ I said. ‘But the puzzle has actually made you look grave. It seems odd that you should think about such things.’

‘Oh! I’m not so empty-headed as you fancy.’

‘You have rather a contempt for women?’

‘Small wonder if I have. Look at the specimens we see. And in Paris it was worse. It is a satisfaction to think one can live out of their follies, but that doesn’t prevent my despising them.’

‘Yet they treat you very well,’ I said.

His eye fell on the letter I had handed to him.

‘It wouldn’t be bad fun,’ he remarked, ‘to marry that girl.’

‘Marry?’ I felt as if I had received a sudden shock. An odd sensation crept over me. Somehow I had never thought of his marrying—of the

change it would make in our present life—of the inevitable break in this pleasant *camaraderie*.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I don’t care for marriage as an institution, but it would be a fine revenge on society if I did win that girl’s dollars away from the needy dukes and impoverished aristocrats who are hunting her down.’

I drank off my glass of claret, still oddly conscious of discomfort and perturbation of spirit. I put it down to the idea of losing a partner so enterprising and desirable.

He glanced at me as if surprised by my long silence. ‘You look quite pale,’ he said. ‘Don’t you like the idea? Of course I’d see you firmly established first. Haven’t I done all I promised so far?’

‘You have, indeed,’ I said gratefully. ‘You’ve saved me from ruin.’

‘Oh! well, I don’t know about that. You’re a plucky woman. You’d have weathered the storm somehow. Besides, I’ve really enjoyed it. And this is only the beginning. You’ll see what next season will do for us.’

I smiled. ‘Us? But if you take a matrimonial partnership?’

‘I sha’n’t do that in a hurry. I was only joking. I believe I prefer this. Besides, we hit it off so well—you and I—don’t we? And I’ve always had an idea of a woman friend—no humbug or nonsense, you know—just give and take—chat and laugh and knock about together. I’m perfectly happy, and perhaps the Peck dollars wouldn’t make me *that*. There’s a deal to swallow along with them.’

‘She’s very pretty,’ I observed.

‘*Une poupée de modiste*. Most American girls are like that. And they carry their gowns too appreciatively. To be well dressed is never to *feel* one is well dressed. That little supercilious self-satisfied air of Josey Peck’s spoils her. It is always calling attention to the real lace on her gown, the real diamonds in her buttons. Her extravagances are in bad taste, and she won’t allow one to forget it.’

I began to laugh.

‘I shall never forget,’ I said, ‘the way you spoke to her mother. I was terrified.’

‘That shows how little you know of your sex. But I often laugh at that scene myself. What a humbug I am!’

He suddenly stretched a hand across the table to me. 'Do you believe in me at all?' he asked.

I gave him my own hand, and looked frankly back into the questioning blue eyes.

'Yes—I do.'

'Thank you, Mrs Costello,' he said softly. 'Some day I'll tell you—'

He broke off abruptly, released my hand, and rose from the table.

I had not the courage to ask what he meant to tell me—some day.

CHAPTER IX

REST. Change. Peace.

The splash of waves on shingle, the cool breeze of the salt sea. Red-brown cliffs, blue sky melting into blue waters. How beautiful it all is, and how I enjoy it!

I came here three days ago, and I have spent those days in blissful idleness.

I had left heat and dust behind me. The cry of the lavender-seller was in the streets. Every self-respecting householder had blinds down, or shutters up, and caretakers were having a right good time in deserted mansions. I had seen six babies and as many matrons at tea in a dining-room in Portman Square, and aristocratic carriages that had graced the Row held many strange freights when the horses were out for 'exercise.'

But for three days I have lounged, bathed and slept away the hours in delightful lazi-

ness, trying to forget the existence of scissors, the exigencies of 'cut' and 'fit,' and pushing out of sight the forthcoming troubles of the winter season.

The society papers furnish me with news of my fashionable customers. I follow them through the winding mazes of foreign travel and so-called 'cures.' I see them disporting themselves at Homburg and Marienbad, and Ostend and Trouville, still pursuing their flying fetish, Pleasure. Still unable to enjoy existence without the excitement of gambling, dining, flirting, dancing—and rivalry.

Thank goodness I have still some simple tastes left and can appreciate Nature and peace, even alone, and with but myself and my various books and journals for company. Better company and safer too than our friends at 'Bads' or Kursaals.

I learn that the Queen is taking donkey-drives at Balmoral, and that various Royals are trout or salmon fishing in the neighbourhood. That a sedan chair has been utilised for the cotillon. That rich Americans and 'amazing' smart women are giving the Prince a gay time of it

at Homburg during his wife's absence at her girlhood's home.

I note that heroines of various *causes célèbres* have been whitewashed and reinstated in certain sections of society, and intend to live chiefly abroad. Wise proviso! And I suffer much indignation and annoyance at the pert personalities of 'Bat' and 'Tattle' of so-and-so, who, in common with various 'Myras' and 'Bellas' and 'Violantes,' persist in describing people of whom they know nothing, and furnishing an inquisitive public with the information that they looked remarkably smart, and wore some fine diamonds (as if these penny-a-liners knew the real thing from Parisian *bijouterie*).

Tired of this rubbish, I at last closed my eyes and leant back, listening drowsily to the plash of the waves and the sound of children's voices in the distance.

I was wondering whether I should get tired of solitude, tired of this unfashionable little coastguard village where there was neither pier, nor band, nor any amusement, and which only offered health and peace and cheapness to its visitors. I had taken two rooms at the

little hotel on the cliff. At present I was the only lady visitor and naturally was excessively comfortable.

As I lay in the dreamy beatitude of perfect rest, I became conscious of voices close at hand—one languid and betraying mental or bodily weakness, the other pleasant, persuasive and full-toned.

I opened my eyes and, glancing up from the tilted umbrella stretched over my head, saw an elderly woman and a somewhat feeble-looking youth. He was leaning on her arm. His pale face and vacant blue eyes met my gaze and then were turned indifferently aside. His companion, on the contrary, observed me with some attention. They passed on and I gave them but the languid curiosity one bestows on newcomers at a seaside place.

Then I resumed my meditations until luncheon time.

When I entered the coffee-room I saw to my surprise that the table next my own was occupied by these people. The lady had removed her large shady hat and I saw a worn, anxious face under thick bands of iron-

grey hair. She was dressed in black. The boy—for he looked nothing else—would have been good-looking but for the pallor of his face, which melted into the pale tints of his hair, and gave him that look of insipidity so often noticeable in very fair men.

I discovered presently they were mother and son, and from the extreme attention they received at the hands of the waiter, I began to think they must be people of importance.

When the waiter presently answered, 'Yes, my lady,' to some remark, I wondered if he was giving her more than a mere courtesy title. I noted the boy scarcely touched any food, but drank claret and water thirstily. She seemed greatly distressed by his lack of appetite.

He did not speak much, and his voice was low and languid, so were the movements of his hands. He made me think of the young man in *The Green Carnation*. His attitude was a pose, and small as his audience was, I felt he was acting for our benefit. Once he caught my eye and favoured me with a long, deliberate stare. Then he began to talk. His language was stilted and affected, and his would-be

cleverness wearisome after the first novelty had worn off. But his mother listened enraptured. Poor soul ! He was evidently the idol of her heart—a very poor and meagre idol, to my thinking.

When I had finished my luncheon I retired to my own room. It was too hot to go out. I took a book and ensconced myself in a basket chair in a shady corner of the balcony which overlooked the sea. Presently the whiff of a cigarette informed me I had a neighbour. I glanced up and saw the interesting youth just drawing a chair into the adjoining balcony, preparatory to enjoying the afternoon in similar fashion.

He smiled faintly as I looked at him. ‘Have you been staying here long ?’ he inquired.

‘Only three days,’ I answered.

‘Anything to do ?’

‘Nothing, unless you mean to bathe—or row—or fish.’

He shuddered affectedly.

‘Bathe—*there*.’ His glance indicated publicity. ‘Oh ! no, thanks, not for me. Public bathing is the most indelicate of our many indelicate nineteenth-century achievements.’

‘Do you really think so ?’ I exclaimed. ‘Why,

I have a boat every morning and take a header into the deep, and swim back a quarter of a mile or so. It is delicious.'

He surveyed me with his straw-coloured head a little on one side like a meditative bird.

'How strong you must be!' he said pathetically.

'That is more than you are to judge from your looks,' I answered.

'Yes, I'm considered delicate. The mater does fuss over me so, too. She's brought me here because some old fogey of a doctor told her it possessed the finest air in England. Just as if they don't say that of every place where they've an interest in the property. He's one of the shareholders of this hotel, and has built a bungalow up there.'

His glance indicated a red brick building I had noticed beyond the sandhills.

'Oh ! indeed,' I said vaguely.

'Yes. And the mater thought it would be so convenient to have him within call. . . . You see my father's dead, and I come into the property next year, and she's tremendously anxious about me.'

I grew interested. 'Are you very delicate?'

'So they say.' A curious look came into his eyes, and his white hand languidly flicked the ash of his cigarette.

'It's a great bore being an only child, and an only son. I'd change places with anyone. I want merely to exist pleasantly. No troubles, no worries. Books, wines, cigarettes, artistic surroundings, and above all—calm. No one understands the beauty of calm nowadays. The philosophers did. But society is a series of fireworks — bang — fizz — splutter. An endless rush, an endless excitement. And they think I'll do the same because I'm born into the set. However, I've my own ideas.'

'May I ask your name?' I inquired gently.

'I've a good many. I'm known as Lord Ernie to my friends—my father was the Earl of Wrexborough. Next year I'll be that—if I live.'

'Surely there is no reason why you should not?' I observed.

His face seemed to grow whiter, and a curious dull film gathered over his eyes. He made no answer. He threw aside his cigarette and leant languidly back against his cushioned chair. I

watched him with some wonder and some fear. Presently his eyes opened again. He looked furtively round, and then his hand went to the breast pocket of his coat. He seemed to have entirely forgotten my presence. I watched him curiously, fascinated by his look and actions. I saw him draw a small case from the pocket. Then he drew back his cuff and exposed a thin, blue-veined arm. With a swift, sudden movement he applied what looked like a glass needle to the exposed skin, withdrew it and replaced it in the case.

I rose hurriedly. 'Whatever are you doing?' I exclaimed.

He gave a guilty start. 'Why—who the devil! I beg pardon—I had forgotten you!'

Then suddenly the film cleared from his eyes. The colour flushed his waxen cheeks, and his face looked alive and alert. The transformation was marvellous.

He rose and came towards me. Only a railing divided us. 'You look a good sort,' he said hurriedly. 'Can you keep a secret? Don't say a word to my mother—she doesn't know. But the stuff keeps me alive. I couldn't do with-

out it. It's all right. The doctor knows. Why, how scared you look.'

'It's—it's not morphia?' I gasped, feeling faint and sick as I thought of his youth, his prospects, and present mad folly.

'God bless you! No. . . . I tell you it's quite safe. Only we don't tell the old lady because it might frighten her. Promise you won't say a word.'

'I'll act on my own discretion,' I said coldly. 'I've heard a great deal about these hypodermic injections. I don't like them, and it seems dreadful to see a boy like you using drugs. Do you suffer? Is there any special reason why you should do this?'

He gave a short, caustic laugh. 'Every reason. It doesn't hurt me, and it's a heaven within reach. You're a woman. . . . You couldn't understand. . . .'

'I don't wish to understand,' I said sharply. 'But I know those habits—morphia—opium—absinthe drinking—they are the bane of modern day civilisation.'

'Everything is pardonable that lends pleasure to life,' he said. 'An existence that is purely

material—eating—drinking—sleeping—how absolutely terrible! Any boor is our equal. A habit that can lift us into a realm of ideal beauty — can give us dreams that no mere mortal obtains—is worth any sacrifice.'

I shuddered. To stand here in the golden calm of the afternoon, the blue serenity of sky and sea about us, and hear such young lips proclaim such heresies. It was awful!

'Even the sacrifice of life?' I said at last.

'Life is only a phase, a passing moment, a breath on a mirror. Even the clergy preach that to us. They are only wise who beautify its moments, and let imagination rule their passions and their hearts.'

'Is that something you have learnt? . . . the cant of a set neither reputable nor useful.'

'Useful! What a dreadful word! Meant for clods and money-lenders. My dear lady, you have a great deal to learn—yet.'

He leant forward and his eyes and voice grew persuasive. 'You won't say anything to my mother?' he asked again.

'It is none of my business,' I said. 'But I give no promise.'

‘You are too beautiful to be obdurate,’ he said. ‘I shall trust you. Meanwhile, let us be friends. This is a small place. We shall meet constantly. Perhaps I may convert you to my theories of a beautiful existence in a commonplace world.’

‘God forbid!’ I ejaculated under my breath, as his cool, slim hand touched mine.

It seemed, even there amidst the warm sunshine, as the touch of death.

CHAPTER X

WITH a sudden desire for fresh air, space, freedom, I put on my hat and went out.

This boy and his history had horrified me. So young, so old ; a slave to an enthralling and dangerous habit. A cynic, yet an epicure. A diseased mind controlling a frail body. There was the essence of tragedy around him. I knew and had heard enough of modern youth, but I had never come face to face with such a specimen.

The bold sweep of sea and the fresh cool breeze seemed doubly delightful after that unwholesome atmosphere. The sun was veiled by clouds. There was a promise of rain or storm in the leaden-coloured west, but I paid no heed to it, I was too much occupied with my own thoughts.

The touch of heavy rain-drops on my face warned me that I was far from shelter. I glanced at my watch and found it was close on five o'clock.

Before I reached the hotel the storm burst.

Peals of thunder resounded ; lightning flashed from end to end of the broad horizon line. The sea grew black save where the curling waves lifted their crests of foam. There was a grandeur and beauty about Nature's wrath that I could not but admire. Everything looked small and puny in comparison, and even when I reached the hotel I stood in the entrance watching the process of the storm instead of going to my own room to change my wet gown. The air was hot and sultry. The dense clouds, barred with orange and crimson, seemed to touch the sea as it rose and swelled beneath, and one sharp rattling peal of thunder shook the sky and was followed by a flash of light so wide and blinding that involuntarily I stepped within. At the same moment a piercing scream rang through the house.

I started, and rushed up the stairs. In the corridor a group of frightened chamber-maids and waiters crowded together.

‘What is the matter—who screamed?’ I asked.

‘It's the young gentleman in there,’ said one of the men. ‘He's been doin' nothing else ever since the storm came on. And the countess, poor lady, is half distracted. She can't stop him.’

I walked to the door and knocked sharply. I heard stifled groans ; then a voice demanded who was there.

‘Let me come in ; perhaps I can be of use ;’ I answered.

The door opened, and the white, agitated face of Lady Wrexborough appeared.

‘Come in—if you will,’ she said eagerly. ‘My poor boy is quite hysterical. He cannot endure thunder-storms. The electricity affects him.’

I entered, and closed the door upon the curious group without.

The young fellow lay on a couch, with a rug thrown over him. The blinds and curtains were drawn as if to keep out the glare of the electric flashes. His frame was convulsed with shudderings, and he moaned like one in abject terror.

I went up and took his hand.

‘Come, come, this is childish!’ I said. ‘The lightning can’t hurt you, nor the thunder either. The storm is far off and it will soon be over. What are you frightened about?’

‘Oh ! it’s horrible!’ he moaned. ‘It’s torture ! Those flashes seem to set my brain on fire, and every nerve is jarring.’

‘You are weak and ill,’ I said soothingly. ‘Try and control yourself. It can’t last much longer. Shall I sit here and talk to you?’

‘Oh! do. You are so sensible; mother does nothing but cry.’

‘Well, you must promise you won’t scream again,’ I said. ‘You’ve alarmed the whole hotel.’

Another flash, less vivid than before, set him trembling and shaking, but he made some effort at self-control.

For half an hour I sat there beside him, holding his hand, now talking soothingly, now scolding, as he alternately gave way to weakness, or attempted to control it. The poor old lady sat by us, moaning and coaxing as if he were a baby. I could see he was her idol, and that all her hopes were bound up in him. I scarcely knew which I pitied most.

As the storm abated and he grew calmer, I asked her if he was always affected in a similar manner.

‘Oh, no ; it is only lately,’ she answered. ‘But his health is sadly impaired. I have tried every sort of remedy and had the best advice, but nothing seems to do him good. I came here

because I heard the air was so fine. But this storm will do him a great deal of harm. His nerves are so highly strung, and any shock or worry ought to be avoided, so the doctors say.'

I thought of that secret of his, of the little devilish invention hidden in his coat pocket, and I wondered if it was my duty to tell her what I had discovered. But surely the doctors knew of his practice, and would have informed her had there been any necessity. As I stood weighing the subject in my mind, he suddenly sat up quite calm and composed.

'I'm all right now,' he said. 'There's something about you—' He took my hand and looked at it for a moment. 'It has magnetism. It is the healer's hand,' he said. 'You've done me good. Mother, hadn't you better ring for tea, and ask Mrs—'

'Costello,' I informed him.

'Mrs Costello to have a cup? How patient you've been,' he added gratefully.

I felt sorry and interested, and yet—uncomfortable. But I stayed on and had tea, and his mother unbent from her frozen dignity of luncheon time, and showed herself very pleasant

and entertaining. Still, the harping on one string, and that string 'Ernie,' was rather wearisome, and I rose at last and wished them good-bye. They were to dine in their own sitting-room, and I was not sorry to hear it. I felt I had had quite enough for one day, even of a prospective earl.

I retired to my own room to change my dress and write up my diary.

.

The evening post brought me a long letter from Wildash. His letters were always delightful—long, chatty, amusing, satirical, bringing scenes and people before one without apparent effort, as some writers have a knack of doing. I sat out on the cliffs facing the now tranquil sea, and read it with keen enjoyment.

He sketched Homburg and its visitors skilfully for my amusement—touching lightly the scandals of the hour—painting the follies and rivalries of the gay, frivolous crowd, who sipped their water, and chirped their endless gossip under the trees, and were so gracious to their compeers and so insolent to those who 'weren't in it.'

I seemed to see that multitude of royalties, titles, millionaires and beauties who crowded the hotels, and the *allées*, and watched the tennis matches.

‘The Pecks are here,’ he went on. ‘You should have seen Josey’s astonishment when she saw me. Her mother “cut” me; in a very stupid, blundering way too, (I’ll pay her out in her next gown for that), but the girl bowed and gushed, and was quite friendly. They’re not in with any of the best people, and it riles the old lady. She sits under the trees and glowers at the crowd, and covers herself with jewellery till she looks like a decorated Christmas tree. But it’s all no good. Meanwhile, Miss Peck rides or bikes with me in the early mornings—and if I *wished* I could make all the running in that quarter. Shall I?—No. It wouldn’t be fair to our bargain—so set your mind at rest.

‘I often wish you were here. I want someone to talk to. You know what I mean. . . . I’ve got some splendid ideas for our winter campaign. Daring if you like—but *chic*—adaptations of Vienna. The Austrian women *do* dress well. No one can touch them—and such figures! It

makes Miss Josey mad when I praise other women—so I'm always doing it. They've bought a house in Park Lane, she tells me—or rather a lease of one—and are going to make a *real* splash next season. Poor things!—If they only knew what birth and breeding say of American pretentiousness. Why don't they stop in their own country? They'd be much better off, but there's no getting them to believe that, and when one of their heiresses does land into our aristocracy—by Jove! she out-Herods Herod with her airs and graces! And yet what a difference in the *real* thing when you do see it—'

I had read so far by the light of the full August moon when a shadow fell across the page. I glanced up and saw my young friend of the afternoon.

'I hope I'm not interrupting you?' he said.

'Oh! no—I've finished my letter. I hope you're feeling better?'

'Yes—thanks. I'm all right again.'

He pushed his straw hat to the back of his pale gilt head, and gazed dreamily over the water.

‘Do you mind if I smoke?’

‘Not at all—I rather like it.’

‘What a sensible woman you are,’ he said, seating himself beside me. ‘I’ve been thinking so all the evening. Would you mind telling me if you’re—married? I mean if you’ve a husband.’

‘I have no husband,’ I said drily, and conscious of slightly heightened colour.

‘I’m so glad. I thought you had an owner who’d be turning up. You’re so very pretty, you know, and look so young to be a widow.’

I laughed. ‘I never heard widowhood demanded any special age for its privilege of freedom.’

‘Of course not. But women like you aren’t long left to freedom.’

‘You must know a great deal about my sex,’ I remarked sarcastically.

‘No. I don’t like them—as a rule. They seriously interfere with the enjoyment of life. They are so exacting and so selfish—and as for girls—oh! I do *hate* girls.’

‘A bad look-out for the future Countess of Wrexborough,’ I said.

‘That’s the worst of that beastly title. They’ll be worrying me to get married. You’re—you’re not an actress, are you, Mrs Costello?’

‘Certainly not. What made you think so?’

‘You’ve such a style, and dress so well. My mother thought you might be one—down here for quiet, don’t you know—studying a new part. She’s terribly afraid of actresses—but I like them—when they don’t talk too much. I know Julia Neilson and Mrs Pat Campbell very well. They’re dear things, but not a patch on you for style.’

‘I’m vastly obliged to you for the compliment,’ I said, laughing.

‘I really mean it. Then you don’t talk shop—all actresses do. Can’t help it, I suppose. They’ve so many rehearsals, and then the life—so limited and self-engrossed.’

‘Yes. It must be rather monotonous. Besides, actresses always like everyone else to know *who* they are. . . .’

‘Do you go into society much?’ he continued after a brief pause.

‘As much as I care to,’ I said evasively.

‘I don’t. I hate it. I belong to the New

Siècle Club. We founded it for the culture and enjoyment of Youth, and the evasion of Social Obligations. No one over twenty is eligible for election.'

I thought he was old enough and *blasé* enough for fifty, but I merely asked what they did at this juvenile institution.

He smiled enigmatically. 'Oh! enjoy life with the least trouble, and the highest regard for its artistic side. No talent is disregarded. Our secretary plays the pan-pipes. It is almost a forgotten art. Yet it takes one back to Arcadia to hear him.'

'A Punch and Judy man would do that for you,' I said bluntly.

'Oh! my dear lady!' he exclaimed in a shocked voice. 'How dreadful! as if there *could* be any comparison!'

'Perhaps not as regards the players,' I said, laughing. 'But the instruments are the same.'

'That is the secret of art,' he said. 'To glorify what would otherwise be commonplace, to lend lustre and delight to the incomplete.'

'Your club must be very efficient, then. I suppose you have a great many members?'

‘At present only twelve,’ he said with a sigh. ‘But it is scarcely known yet; and we want our influence to be gradual. It is not a sordid affair, based on commercial lines, vulgarised by eating and drinking. We subsist cheerfully on simple luxuries. We never dine—in the accepted term. We have occasional banquets—feasts of roses and song—fruits and choice wines—winding up with hookahs and sherbet. We make an idyl, not an orgie, of life.’

I rose abruptly. ‘The dew is falling and you are an invalid. Hadn’t you better come in?’

‘It is so beautiful here. The repose, the peace. Why did you disturb it?’

I felt inclined to tell him I had heard enough of his club, and his idyls; but I only said I was tired, and wished him good-night.

I thought I had never appreciated the breezy manfulness and *bonhomie* of Wildash so thoroughly as now.

CHAPTER XI

A WEEK has passed.

Taking generalities instead of details, I must candidly call it a week of 'Lord Ernie.' From early morn to dewy eve that estimable youth has been my shadow. We drove together, sailed and walked together, and sat out in the moonlight together. His mother had neuralgia the best part of the time!

If I were the designing widow of fiction I could have caught my fledgling very easily, made him marry me privately, and woke up Countess of Wrexborough one fine morning. But neither his title nor his broad acres tempted me—allied as they were inseparably to his miserable little personality, and gilt-edged conceit.

The smallness and vanity of the boy's nature were intolerable. I gave him innumerable lectures, and 'set him down' as often as possible, but this treatment only seemed to

make him more attached to me. My superb health, my love of air and exercise, my fearlessness of storm or weather, on land or on sea, were subjects of incessant marvel to him.

I had even talked and bullied him out of his wretched habit of drug-injecting, though he suffered terribly from the loss. However, I held to the case, and refused to give it back, and warned his valet that I would inform Lady Wrexborough if he procured his young master any more of the stuff. I found it was cocaine he had been using. One day he let out that at this precious club of his, all the youths used some drug or other. It was a horrible and disgusting practice. Yet these scions of noble houses and heirs to titles and great names, thought nothing of enfeebling their constitutions, and degrading their manhood and future virility by such a loathsome habit.

Perhaps I have succeeded in making him ashamed of it. He appears so now, but I think he is too weak for any influence to be lasting. When he returns to his old friends he will, no doubt, return to his old evil ways.

.

I told Wildash about this boy. His answer was peculiar.

‘Lord Ernie is well known to a certain set—a set who are ostracised by the self-respecting members of society—a set given up to the worship of Self in every form. They profess artistic tastes (save the mark!), and think it is very wonderful and very original to set all laws of decency and self-government at defiance. Better an out-and-out blackguard, with the strength to sin boldly, than these effete, corrupt, miserable worms who have crept into our *fin-de-siècle* life, and ruin minds and morals with their poisonous follies!’

.
I did not say this to Lord Ernie, but I dropped occasional hints that seemed to frighten him, and for a day or two I avoided meeting or speaking to him, unless in his mother’s presence.

.
To-night I came across him unexpectedly. He was sitting on a rock, in a remote part of the beach, gazing abstractedly into the deep clear pools of sea water left by the receding tide.

The moon was at its full, and a track of gold

lay over the wide stretch of waters. Scarce a breath of air rippled the shining surface. Peace held its own in this world-forgotten nook.

He looked up and saw me. His face was very white, and his eyes had an odd, wild look in them.

‘Do you know what I was contemplating?’ he asked me suddenly. ‘Death. Death in its quiet, pale corruption, its placid senselessness. Death in this great sea-vault with the waves forever rolling overhead, and all the strange, uncanny creatures of the ocean as attendant mourners. He seemed inviting me—that pale King with his bony face and eyeless sockets. I seemed to hear him say—’

‘Oh, for goodness sake don’t talk such rubbish!’ I exclaimed angrily. ‘What have you been doing? Not at that vile stuff again?’

‘No. On my honour—no,’ he said eagerly. ‘I promised I would tell you, and so I will. I am only melancholy. You have avoided me. I could read indifference in your look, and coldness in your eyes. I became a prey to miserable forebodings. Have I offended you in any way?’

‘No,’ I said, looking at the wan and miserable young face; ‘not specially. Not more than

your uselessness and morbidness always do offend me.'

'Cure me of them!' he cried eagerly. 'Be my salvation. Already you have helped me so much. . . . You are my life's good angel, I feel sure. I have always looked upon marriage as a terror when it has not seemed an absurdity, but—you have converted me. Will you be my wife and make me all you desire? In your hands I should be as wax. I recognise in you that pure and superior power to which alone I can bow. Say you will use it on my behalf.'

He had moved from the rock and was standing by my side. The golden light fell on his face and gave it warmth and colour; his eyes looked at me beseechingly, his weak, mobile lips were trembling. I think he was in earnest, and for a moment or two I allowed myself the triumph of conquest. But was it a triumph after all? . . .

'How long you are answering,' he faltered presently. 'Is "yes" so hard to say?' and he held out his hands.

That gesture decided me. Like a flash I saw another hand stretched out to me—a laughing face and pleading eyes alive with purpose, and brim-

ful of humour. This was but the corpse of all true sentiment—a puny weakling for whom I had no feeling save pitying contempt. Yet—to be Countess of Wrexborough?—never more to have to slave and work, and be at the mercy of great ladies' whims and millionaires' purses!—how tempting was the picture!

Then the cold damp hands touched mine, and I drew suddenly away.

'No,' I said firmly. '*No*, Lord Ernie, I will not marry you.'

He hung his head like a chidden child. 'Is it because of my life . . . of what I have confessed?'

'Partly—and partly because marriage has no attraction for me. Neither your position nor your set would compensate for the attendant drawbacks to both.'

'Drawbacks!' he repeated, as if bewildered.

'Yes. I know a great deal of what goes on behind the scenes of society. Your great ladies are not all they seem. Their life—which looks so alluring to those on the fringe of that supposed Paradise—has no attraction for me. If you are born into a position you must put up with it, but if you're adopted into one it will often not put up

with you. I don't like insolence, and no one can be so offensively insolent as your great lady.'

'You would be as good as any of them.'

'Perhaps, but they would not think so. The set into which a marriage with you would take me, is a set I know particularly well.'

'But how the deuce—'

I smiled. 'You have taken me very much on trust. You have never asked who or what I am?'

'Anyone could see you were thoroughbred at a glance. Burke and Debrett couldn't do more for you than you do for yourself.'

'A pretty compliment, but still it would not carry much weight even with your—mother—shall we say?'

'Oh! hang it all. I'm not bound to ask her.'

'Still, she could make it very unpleasant for both of us, if she knew you wanted to marry a—dressmaker!'

'A—what?'

'A dressmaker; pure and simple. A lady, I grant you, but my position is only that of a Court *modiste* of Bond Street. Society will receive a music-hall star, a stage dancer, even a burlesque actress when she sports her coronet, and

trails her wedded lord after her skirts, but it would turn its back on a woman who had made its gowns, and learnt its *petits secrets*, and been in its debt, and received its cheques from many strange sources. That would be a very different story. There are no hard and fast rules about society. It is a very queer institution ; but it has its own ideas of who may steal the horse, and who may not even glance at the stable door.'

His face was flushed now, and I could see he was struggling with the varied emotions caused by my confession.

'Then you will not—marry me?' he blurted out at last.

'No. And you ought to be very grateful to me for saying so. If I were designing, or self-seeking, I should jump at your offer.'

'If you only cared,' he muttered. 'It seems hard that the only woman who has made me want to marry her, should refuse me.'

'I cannot understand why you should want to marry me,' I said, moving on at last. He turned and walked beside me.

'You have been so good to me,' he said.

‘And you are strong and helpful and sensible. I’ll never find another woman like you.’

Again I laughed. ‘Oh, yes, you will, but you must alter your own life first. I’m not good at lecturing, but I feel I ought to lecture you. You must throw off all these affectations. You must try and be a credit to your manhood and your race. Your mother is devoted to you. . . . Think what she would suffer did she know what you confessed to me. Think of your youth and health ruined for want of a little moral courage—the courage to break a pernicious habit, and give up a set of false and unworthy companions. What good woman *could* respect or love you if she knew of your life? Believe me, women love a manly man—one they can look up to and reverence. It rests with yourself to deserve such a woman, and she will complete your life and teach you happiness.’

‘The more you say the more I love—you. I can’t even think of any other woman.’

‘Nonsense!’ I said cheerfully. ‘Why, I’m at least ten years older than yourself.’

‘Age matters nothing when one loves.’

‘Perhaps not; but I don’t love you, and I

should be always remembering my grey hairs and wrinkles while you were in the prime of life.'

'If you understood me—'

I grew impatient. 'I understand you so well that I should never care to understand you better, Lord Ernie. I think you scarcely recognise how much of the *poseur* there is about you. Probably you will play at unhappiness for a while to please your own morbid fancy, but it is your vanity that is concerned, not your heart, and the wound is not deadly. What you call art is merely a false view of life. You don't look at it straight, with clear, honest vision.'

He reddened again, and an offended look came into his face.

'I thought you understood me better,' he said. 'But women are all alike, narrow-minded, full of prejudice. . . .'

'Have you ever given yourself the trouble to understand us?' I asked quietly. 'Your club and its false teachings, the books that have poisoned your mind — what sort of mentors are these?'

'Yet you are sending me back to them.'

‘If you are weak—yes. But I thought—’

‘It’s no use your thinking. I’m like a rudderless ship. I shall drift back as sure as fate, and it will be your fault.’

‘That is the selfish cant a man uses as his strongest weapon. But a woman owes a duty to herself, and self-sacrifice can be a weakness as well as a virtue.’

He was silent a long time. Then he turned suddenly to me and said, ‘Will you give me back my case?’

I looked at him, indignant and ashamed.

‘You put it into the pocket of that gown you are wearing,’ he went on.

My hand went to my pocket. Yes . . . it was there. Slowly I drew it out. Then, without a word, I stepped before him, and threw the pernicious thing far out to sea. It fell on the shining golden track the moon had left, then sank, and was lost to sight.

He followed it with an angry glance; his face deathly white.

‘I’ll get another to-morrow,’ he said, and turned on his heel and walked away in an opposite direction.

CHAPTER XII

I SPENT the whole of the next day on the sea. I engaged a boat and took my luncheon with me. I wished to avoid any *rencontre* with Lord Ernie or his mother.

I made the man land me at a primitive little hamlet where I had tea at a primitive little inn, sacred to fishermen and artists. At sunset I returned. The light was fading out of the sky. The glowing colours of the west paled, save where they flushed some floating feathers of cloud. The sea was mirror-like and waveless, and the distant headlands were only hazy and indistinct shapes.

I took off my hat as I landed, and strolled slowly along over the firm white sands. I was lazily fatigued with my long day, and in no hurry to reach the hotel. Indeed, I felt I had had quite enough of Lord Ernie, and that either he or I would have to leave the place.

The doors stood wide open, and as I entered I was conscious of something unusual in the face of

the porter. He looked at me in a way that roused my curiosity. At the same moment a waiter approached.

‘Excuse me, madam,’ he said. ‘But her ladyship is in a terrible state. She wishes to see you immediate.’

‘Why, what’s happened?’ I exclaimed.

‘His lordship, madam, has been drowned, while bathing . . . so it is supposed. He was picked up by a boatman, and his clothes were lying on the beach, and they brought him straight here, and it’s been something awful. . . . Her ladyship is nearly out of her mind.’

‘Good Heavens! drowned—’ I faltered; and the shock and surprise turned me faint and sick.

I thought of his words the previous evening. ‘Do you know what I was contemplating—Death?’ And it had come to him so suddenly—so soon.

I asked no more questions, but hurried upstairs to the poor mother. She was indeed like one distraught. Pacing to and fro the room, wringing her hands, crying wildly and frantically on the name of her boy (poor worthless idol!).

My heart ached for her. I tried to soothe her.

I knew she had been spared both sorrow and shame in the future, but I could not tell her so.

I wrote letters for her to her men of business ; to relatives who had to be told. I even tried to persuade her to take some food, but all in vain. She only wept and moaned and called on Heaven to take her too, since life had no abiding joy left for her. When she was quite worn out and passive, I administered a sedative left by the doctor, and then the maid and I got her to bed.

The woman promised to sleep in her room that night, and at last I was able to seek my own.

There would have to be an inquest. Perhaps I should be called upon to give evidence. I sincerely hoped not. I felt thankful I had not seen him that morning. It seemed dreadful that my holiday should have had such an ending.

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The inquest was held to-day. The verdict of course was 'Death by misadventure.'

The valet was censured for not accompanying his young master, knowing his delicate condition of health. But as there could be no possible reason for one so blessed with this world's goods taking voluntary leave of them, it was

unanimously agreed that he had been drowned accidentally.

I alone had my fears and my misgivings. But I kept them to myself. As soon as the inquiry was over I returned to London.

It was comparatively empty, at least in fashionable quarters. Bond Street and Regent Street and Piccadilly were quite deserted. The heat had turned to rain, and town looked altogether its dingiest and worst. I had a spell of comparative quiet while I arranged my autumn campaign and took up a few mourning orders. I also made some alterations in the decorations of my rooms, and prepared Paris novelties according to the directions of my invaluable partner.

(He is not coming back till the end of the month, he writes, but I have no immediate need of him just yet.)

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I have just returned from dining with Di Abercroft. She is up to her ears in work and orders. The theatrical season begins in October and she has any amount of new dresses to design for new plays, and actresses are generally as difficult a class to please, as to fit.

Over our coffee and her cigarette I told her my little adventure and its tragic sequence. I could see she thought me a fool to have missed so good a chance.

‘Why, your fortune was made,’ she exclaimed. ‘And the very fact of his being so young was in your favour. You could have done what you pleased with him. It is a mistake for a woman to marry a man older than herself. He either bullies her, or manages her. When she has the advantage of seniority she can bully or manage him.’

‘But he was such a fool,’ I complained. ‘I really couldn’t have done it, Di. Men are bad enough, God knows, but at least I like one with some manliness and strength and character in him. This boy was nothing but a boudoir lap-dog. I believe he powdered his face and wore corsets. He had his nails manicured every morning, and all his linen was laid among sachet bags. He told me so!’

I gave a little shudder, but she only laughed.

‘He was simply the type of ultra-civilised modern youths. Women make pets of them, and they are really quite harmless. . . . Sort of toy dogs, warranted not to bite. Talk-

ing of that, will you believe the latest fad of society is buying toys for its pets. Lady Vyvash told me she had bought a doll for her little Schipperke to play with. The sweet thing did not quite appreciate it, for she bit its head off, so Lady Vy was going to get another for the darling, not quite so expensive, a matter of twenty-five shillings or thereabouts.'

'It's sickening!' I exclaimed. 'And all the woe and want around.'

'They don't realise it. It doesn't come in their way. The police and the County Council take care of that. And dogs are so much more interesting than starving children!'

'What will they do next?'

'I often wonder. They've run through a good many fads lately. Boudoir telephones, and tea-parties for pet dogs, African niggers, gambling on the Stock Exchange, bridge and baccarat, and a few other little pastimes which shall be nameless.'

'I wish they'd take it into their heads to pay their bills,' I observed. 'It's hateful having to ask over and over again.'

'But Wildash is going to establish a ready-money system, I understood you to say.'

‘Only with the *parvenus* and *nouveaux riches*. It wouldn’t do with everyone—Lady Vandeleur, for instance.’

‘No, indeed. I fancy I see the look on her face if you suggested such a thing. By the way, the little Farringdon scandal is growing. . . . She ought to be careful.’

‘I have not seen or heard of her since I came back,’ I said. ‘I was wondering if she had changed her dressmaker.’

‘We did a couple of gowns for her. She was staying somewhere in the neighbourhood of Balmoral and thought she might be asked there.’

‘Oh—and was she?’

‘The society jackals haven’t had any “tips” to that effect. Talking of tips, how did that Peck woman manage to square the society columns? Her name and her doings at Homburg were in every one of them.’

‘I suppose she has learnt the secret,’ I answered moodily. ‘Everyone has his or her price on those papers. You can buy a “par” as easily as you can a penny bun.’

‘Not quite so cheaply though, and not very good value for your money.’

‘Do you think the Pecks will catch on?’ I asked. ‘I believe their mansion in Park Lane is something marvellous. How *do* Americans get so rich?’

‘It’s an amazing country,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘Small beginnings, shady middles, and flourishing ends. But after all it is the *end* people want. They can forget the intermediate stages.’

‘There’s something odiously snobbish in the way people run after money nowadays.’

‘There is, my dear. And yet, for us, who can peep behind the scenes, even snobbery has its uses. We get our bills paid.’

She threw aside her cigarette and leant back in her chair. ‘Tell me something about Wildash?’ she said. ‘I never laughed so much in my life as at your description of him and *la mère* Peck. Isn’t he a demon of audacity? That young man will get on in the world, believe me.’

‘I think I have told you everything up to date,’ I answered. ‘I suppose he has some more surprises in store, but I must wait his arrival.’

‘It certainly,’ she said, ‘is the boldest and most original idea I ever heard of. I would give a great deal to hear him talk to those people.’

I laughed softly at the remembrance of Mrs

Peck's face. 'You'd never forget it if you did. I'm simply dumb, but they stand it. He has taken their measure very correctly when he says that a woman will submit to *anything* for the prestige of being the best-dressed woman of her set.'

'I told you his taste was perfect,' she said thoughtfully. 'Daring, but never wrong. With that, and your genius for "cut," you ought to be a success.'

'I hope I shall—'

'Of course people will talk of the *ménage*, but that won't matter. It's a pity you couldn't marry him.'

'On the contrary, marriage would spoil everything. Did ever any husband give to his wife what he would to a woman whose claims were impersonal—time, attention, homage, forbearance?'

'Perhaps you're right. It's certainly an interesting experiment. You'll lose all the Grundys and that sort, but if he works up the right set your fortune's made.'

'I wonder,' I said, 'if that fact will bring any great satisfaction with it?'

'It ought to. Plenty of money and no need to work. . . . I call it an excellent retiring pension. But we women are always discontented. The moral of the Fisherman's Wife and the Flounder

is peculiarly true. Given what we want is to make us immediately want something more.'

I rose to go. It was eleven o'clock, and I kept early hours when I could.

'Let me know when Wildash returns,' she said, as she helped me on with my cloak. 'We must have a little dinner somewhere and talk over things. I'm frightfully busy, working overtime for the new piece at the Lyric. But I'll spare an evening for that.'

I promised to let her know, and then left.

As I sit here and recall her words, I find myself repeating that suggestion. 'What a pity you couldn't marry him.'

'But I *can*,' I say softly, 'if I wish . . . or he proposed it. Only I don't wish. I am very content with things as they are. He is much better as a friend than a husband. All the same—'

A blot on the paper ; a thoughtful face looking back at me from the mirror, into which I have been absently gazing ; the striking of an hour by the clock ; these remind me of the passage of time. It is half an hour since I wrote those words. . . .

What a long way one can travel in half an hour !

CHAPTER XIII

WILDASH came back to-day.

He was heralded by a cartload of fabrics and modes from Paris and Vienna, sketches and designs of the ultra-*chic* in fashion, and was in wild spirits.

He and Di and I went to a *première* at the Comedy, and afterwards had a delightful little supper at the Savoy. His description of the Pecks at Homburg was simply delicious. We laughed so immoderately that our table became even more noticeable than that of a very fast little peeress, who was entertaining a music-hall 'star' and a fashionable palmist, and whose parties were always remarkable for noise, if not for wit.

It was no unusual thing for me to come across my customers, or clients, at restaurants and supper-rooms, but I was astonished when the door opened to admit Lady Farrington and

Captain Calhoun. I saw she recognised me as she threw a search-light glance over the room, but we never knew one another in public, so my eye remained fixed 'on the coast of Greenland,' to quote Wildash's description.

I repeat that I was a little—just a little—surprised to see her here with this man, but then the smart set and the 'Souls' do very singular things, that are quite above the interpretation of ordinary minds, and for which no mere outsider would dare call them to account. So I turned my attention to quite the other end of the room, and repaid that debt of the case of *liqueurs*.

'Those people were in Paris the other day,' observed Wildash, presently. 'I know Jim Calhoun. His sister is going to make a very brilliant match. She's coming to you for her trousseau gowns and cloaks. He's got to pay all that because the father's dead, and the mother very badly off. I've arranged it. Long credit, but safe in the end. She'll be Duchess of Bridgewater, and she's only twenty.'

'And he?'

'Something near sixty. Quite juvenile—for a duke; and remarkably well-preserved—*vide*

Morning Post. Dear *Morning Post* ! what should we do without its useful information ?'

'She'll be his third wife,' said Di.

'Yes. Let's hope she'll remain so. A last little venture.'

'What a chance for you,' said Di. 'Unless she goes to someone else after her marriage.'

'I think I can answer for that,' said Wildash. 'She has a certain little . . . very little—physical defect. Mrs Costello must discover this, and conceal it. The duchess won't want to change her dressmaker, then.'

I looked at him. 'How did you—'

'How did I find it out? Because my eyes are sharper than most people's . . . and I had long noted a partiality for one peculiar style of bodice. I talked one evening to the brother at Bignon's over a bottle or maybe two of champagne. I spoke of her exquisite face (it really *is* exquisite) and wondered that she inclined to the "muffling" order of shoulder. *In vino veritas*. I got a hint of reasons, and saw my friend home to his hotel, while the early bird sought the worm in Lutetia's silent streets.'

'How poetic!' laughed Di.

‘Yes, and how useful. That trousseau is going to do great things for us. I’ve made up my mind about her presentation dress. There won’t be one like it. Youth, real Titian hair and a skin like white rose leaves—there are possibilities for you!’

‘But Court dress *displays* defects instead of concealing them.’

‘Not as I intend to use it.’

‘You’ll be a godsend to the Sexagenarian Loyalties,’ laughed Di. ‘I should advertise a speciality. Personal defects successfully concealed. What a following you’d have.’

‘It’s surprising,’ he said, ‘how few *really* good figures there are, and how few really beautiful women. Of course hundreds pass as beauties, but then that’s because they make up admirably, dress exquisitely, or are *chic*, or graceful, or audacious! But they won’t bear criticism. You can’t judge them by the canons of beauty. The most perfect types are the Austrians, in my opinion.’

‘Ah!’ said Di, ‘I quite agree with you. There’s a natural grace and elegance about the Viennese . . . Englishwomen can’t touch it.

They're cast in a coarser mould. I always think an Englishwoman looks best with an outdoor background. Give her a hat, and a coat and skirt, and she's all right. It's in rooms — at great pageants she suffers by contrast with her foreign neighbours. She is so conscious of her clothes, and if she has jewels she puts them on in a mass. She wants everyone to see what a quantity she possesses, and hangs them all over herself as a squaw hangs beads.'

'Self ornamentation is only a relic of barbarity,' I said.

'Not even that; savages have it still. To modern women jewels stand in place of the domestic virtues. She'd certainly never rank *them* as "far above rubies."'

Wildash's eyes looked meditatively in the direction of Lady Farrington and Captain Calhoun, and Di and I ate quails in aspic, in silence.

'It will soon be the anniversary of your opening, won't it?' asked Wildash, suddenly

'Yes,' I answered, 'next month.'

'I have an idea for celebrating it,' he said. 'We must talk it over. How many people would your rooms hold?'

‘Not many, I’m afraid—a dozen make a crowd. You’re not meditating an “At home,” I hope?’

‘I am, but something quite out of the common. A big *draw*.’

Di laughed good naturedly. ‘Your audacity will carry you too far some day,’ she said. ‘All women aren’t as meek as Mrs Peck.’

‘All women are manageable in some way,’ he answered. ‘My irons aren’t on one fire only.’

Later on, after he had put Di into a hansom, he asked if he might come home with me for a chat and cigarette. I agreed, late as it was, and over a *chasse* of cognac and the perfumes of best Turkish, he unfolded to me his plan.

It was nothing more or less than to engage some large hall or room and issue invitations for an ‘At home.’ Refreshments and decorations of the best, and most *chic*, also a little, *very* little, music, with specially-engaged and first-class artistes. But the speciality and feature of the proceedings would be a procession of models who were to walk up and down one end of the room on a slightly-raised platform, roped off from the guests. These models were to represent every variety of costume—morning, afternoon and

visiting gowns, Court dress, evening dress, and tea-gown. One of each, and as perfect as could be.

‘But the expense!’ I gasped.

‘Nothing venture—nothing have,’ he said. ‘I’ll get most of the gowns on credit from a place I know. But each must have a finishing touch at *our* hands. And the girls must be handsome and well-figured, of course. Think of the sensation! The wedding march will sound, and a bride will walk on, and slowly parade up and down. Patriotic airs and the Court model appears. Sentimental valse and evening gown of lace and chiffon. Nocturne — tea-gown . . . and so on. I think it’s a grand idea. How the women will talk!’

‘There’s no doubt of *that*,’ I said. ‘But it’s a risk.’

‘Naturally. All big splashes mean a risk. But I can finance you through this if you’ll agree, and the results for next season will be enormous.’

So, after a little more talk, I did agree to venture. I had faith in him, and he knew his world, and knew how to deal with it. Before we parted he had drawn the designs of the invitation cards

and programme, and we agreed to send them out as soon as printed.

The day fixed was the first anniversary of the opening of Frou-Frou's establishment.

Between those weeks I was kept well employed.

Captain Calhoun called with his sister the very next day after the Savoy supper. She was, as Wildash had said, lovely. The face and features were perfect; large turquoise blue eyes looked out from an artistic tangle of red-gold hair. Her skin was velvety. She rarely had any colour, but the rose-petal smoothness of her cheeks was independent of anything so commonplace.

It was not, of course, until her first pattern was being tried on that I discovered the slight defect Wildash had mentioned. I chose to do the fitting myself, and sent the assistant away on some pretext. Then I gently sympathised with the future duchess, and told her that if she would trust herself in my hands, the censorious and argus-eyed mob of a jealous society should be none the wiser.

I could see she was startled and a little confused by my quick perception. But she was young and

ambitious, and would have agreed to anything at that time.

‘In my establishment,’ I told her, ‘discretion is absolute. Not one whisper of our artistic secrets gets beyond the doors. My staff know how particular I am on this point, and that instant dismissal would follow any infringement of the rules.’

I thought to myself that Wildash had an apt pupil, but *que voulez vous*—one must live.

The future duchess left the selection of her gowns and cloaks to me, so I called in Wildash to interview her.

He was very merciful. The admiration in his eyes as they rested on her face, turned only to the gentlest commiseration as they swept over her shoulders and somewhat *petite* figure.

I saw her blush, but he merely took out notebook and pencil and jotted down a few words.

‘Blush-rose, pale turquoise, French grey, and white,’ he said rapidly. ‘Also, for bold effect, one gown of flame-coloured *peau de soie*, as near as possible the colour of Miss Calhoun’s hair. To be trimmed with lace *appliqué*.’

‘And the presentation gown?’ I suggested.

‘Ah!’ he said, and half closed his eyes. ‘Her Grace will have my idea submitted to her when she returns from the *lune de miel*. She has lace, no doubt, or will have it included among wedding presents.’

‘Oh! yes,’ answered the girl. ‘I am to have some very rare old lace among my trousseau.’

‘An entire train of lace,’ he observed.

She started. ‘But I thought Court trains must be of some heavy material—silk, satin, brocade, isn’t it?’

‘We are always designing new effects,’ he answered courteously. ‘For one so dainty and fairy-like as Her Grace of Bridgewater nothing heavy would be suitable. Besides, the weight—’ He paused, and his eyes seemed reminiscent of a defective shoulder.

A wave of colour mounted to the girl’s exquisite face. ‘It is also the custom,’ he went on, ‘for a bride to wear her wedding-gown at her presentation. The fact of its being the custom is quite sufficient for our firm to avoid it. We pride ourselves on being absolutely original, or, at least, as original as prescribed and arbitrary functions will allow. The ceremony of a Draw-

ing-room is long and tedious enough without a woman being burdened with the weight of an enormous train suspended from her shoulders or supported by her hips. You, madam, shall have no such burden. Titania herself could not look more fairy-like, or *spirituelle*, than you shall look if you but trust to me.'

'Willingly,' she said. 'I will wait then for your designs.'

'Meanwhile,' he urged, 'don't breathe a word to a living soul of the lace train. Next season there will be scores of them. Believe me, madam, there is but one secret for the true *élégante* to master. She must be just one day, one hour even, in advance of the fashion. She must *set* instead of *follow*. That is simple enough, is it not? I make a present of it to Her future Grace of Bridgewater.'

He bowed, closed the note-book, and left the room.

The girl turned to me, a faint flush still upon her cheek and wonder in her eyes.

'What an absolutely charming man!' she exclaimed.

And I knew Wildash had achieved another victory.

CHAPTER XIV

I SHOULD not be giving a true account of my professional career if I pretended that all my customers were polite, courteous, and solvent. Even my first year's experience did not give these points the favour of a majority.

An instance of *bourgeois* courtesy following close upon that interview with Miss Calhoun is worthy of mention.

I received a visit from two ladies, both unmarried, who had come up from some town in the Midlands. I had been introduced to them through the pages of an illustrated fashion journal. One of them required an evening gown which she insisted should be of flaming scarlet satin, trimmed with steel and sequins and lace. It went against the grain to contemplate such a gown, but the girl was tall, dark, and finely proportioned, and I yielded. I never summoned Wildash to people of this sort. It was beneath his genius to advise or design for them. The dress was completed and sent to the

Hotel Metropole where the young lady (*sic*) and her friend were staying.

The following day I received a letter to this effect :—

‘MADAME FROU-FROU,—I am Miss Normanton Tighe. You will remember I called at your shop with my friend Miss de Vaux Browne who ordered an evening robe. What price will you charge to make me one of sky-blue satin, lined silk, trimmed lace and flowers? A *berthe* of flowers, and trails down the skirt. I am most particular, as the robe is to be worn at my papa’s State Ball at the Town Hall in honour of his Mayoralty and Confederateship on accession to his Title of Knighthood. An early answer will oblige

Miss NORMANTON TIGHE.’

This epistle was too good to keep to myself. I showed it to Wildash, who was first indignant and then roared with laughter. Unfortunately though it roused his Irish spirit to retaliation, and he insisted on my writing a note at his dictation to the following effect :—

‘Madame Frou-Frou presents her compliments to Miss Normanton Tighe, and regrets she cannot

undertake an order for any Provincial State Ball. She suggests that Miss Normanton Tighe should place her order in the hands of Messieurs Jay, or Peter Robinson, or some firm honoured by Royal patronage.'

'There!' he exclaimed triumphantly. 'If that won't bring her down a peg I know nothing of women. She is sure to go to one of these firms, and they'll give her a reading which will astonish her. I should like to add a postscript recommending her to have a little more education, especially in the art of letter writing. But I suppose I'd better not.'

'Indeed, no!' I exclaimed. 'Even as it stands the letter will put her into a fine rage. I remember her that day—stout, red-faced, supercilious, and bursting out of a tailor-made coat of red cloth and brass buttons, topped by a large blue chiffon hat. She was also very careful of her umbrella, and told me the handle was "real" gold.'

'We don't want customers like that,' he said. 'They're no credit, and assuredly no recommendation.'

'They've one advantage,' I sighed. 'They pay cash down.'

‘Well, we’re not insolvent yet,’ he laughed. ‘And talking of that, you must join the T. P. S. It’s a splendid thing. You’ll learn whom to trust, and whom to avoid, besides protecting yourself against defaulters. I’ll arrange that. It’s rather difficult to get into. You want first-class references. But we can get those—now. Besides, the big shops give ever so much longer credit if they know you’re in the Society. We’ve a pretty large account at Debenham’s, haven’t we?’

‘Indeed, yes,’ I said. ‘Enough to make me afraid of Christmas.’

‘Calhoun’s good for some ready money down—I know that. His future brother-in-law is very generous. Fancy that girl with eighty thousand a year. It’s monstrous. Not but we can help to relieve her of a fair share of her pin-money. If it’s true that one half the world suffers in order that the other half may enjoy—the sufferers are entitled to make what they can of *their* bargain.’

He laughed and sauntered off to enjoy a cigarette in his office, while he went over the books and examined into liabilities. I wished I could take things as easily as he did, but I confess debts always made me uncomfortable.

.
Everything was arranged for the 'At home' Wildash had planned. He had engaged a very large room in Baker Street, which could easily accommodate a couple of hundred people. It happened to be exceptionally well decorated, and when beautified by flowers and plants, seats and screens, alcoves and electric lights, the effect would be charming.

There was to be a sort of buffet at one end of the room where some half-dozen girls in black skirts and scarlet page jackets, and powdered wigs, would serve as attendants. This was to introduce the idea of female liveried servants. Tea and coffee, and dainty sandwiches and cakes would be provided. He explained that elaborate refreshments would be out of place, and I quite agreed with him.

Di was in a state of jealous rapture as the day approached. I think she envied me this odd, inventive partner, though she had at first scoffed at him. He had designed my own dress for the occasion, and assuredly I had no reason to fear rivalry. It was a masterpiece of simple and effective elegance, besides having the one novel touch of a

forthcoming fashion which would not be given to the world for another fortnight.

The invitation cards had not required answers, so we were uncertain as to how many guests would honour us. However, on the day itself I became almost alarmed at the numbers who poured in. Carriages stood in double rows all up the street. Splendid footmen in gorgeous liveries kept my page busy in answering their knocks. Through the long room sailed and strutted the peacocks of the fashionable world, and lorgnetted glances expressed approval of my ideas, and, only too often, a modified envy of my own *chic* appearance.

The Pecks were there, of course, and Lady Farrington, and Captain Calhoun's sister. She wore one of our gowns. It was of white cloth. A full snowy boa of ostrich feathers fell to her feet, and a Frou-Frou toque showed one touch of turquoise-blue velvet to match her lovely eyes.

Whatever the people had expected they certainly were not prepared for the sort of afternoon I gave. A first-rate lady pianist played enchanting fragments from works of well-known composers. The tea was always fresh, hot and fragrant. And the caviare biscuits and 'soldier sandwiches' were a

credit to Wither's establishment. Besides this, they all knew each other, and could chatter and gossip and scream to their hearts' content.

The first note of surprise was struck when the piano commenced a slow and stately measure—the curtains screening the platform drew aside, and there walked up and down in time to the music the first Model. A card of description was affixed to one of the draped-back curtains, and the audience was thus enabled to see what was represented.

A short interval elapsed between each exhibit—enough to allow of discussion and refreshment.

The bride was a great success. She walked on, stately and magnificent in glistening satin and lace, her train held by a little page in Vandyke costume, and a tiny bridesmaid whose attire was that of a Puritan maiden. The wedding march announced this living tableau, and the visitors insisted on its repetition.

Then came the Court gown—a thing of wonder and magnificence, to which Mrs Aurelius B. Peck lost her heart. Silver tissue covered the most exquisite shade of green, the colour of a lily-of-the-valley leaf. A touch of blush-rose

pink at the left side of the bodice and train was the only other note of colour. Our model was tall and fair, with a faultless figure, and proudly peacocked up and down the carpeted stage as pleased with herself as the crowd seemed to be with her gown.

The tea-gown ended the show, and for this Wildash had introduced a recumbent figure, whose graceful limbs, clad in silken tights, might be traced through filmy clouds of chiffon, deepening from the pink of dawn to the rose of sunset, and foamed with lace of the cobweb texture appliquéd on to chiffon. Then the curtain fell for the last time, and *my* hour of triumph arrived. One and all surrounded me with congratulations, compliments, and promises of orders.

Never had they seen anything like it, they declared. I was perfectly sure of that, and sure also that the account of the exhibition would be all over the fashionable world in twenty-four hours.

‘So original! . . . So unique, — wonderful,’ they cackled. And one or two murmured, ‘So expensive’—and wondered how I could go to such lengths. But these were censorious people who owed too large bills to their *modistes* to

dare change them for another, and who had to wear the dresses their tyrants gave them for fear of an *exposé*.

Josey Peck sidled up to me once.

'Isn't *he* here?' she whispered. 'It's ages since I've seen him, and I've got something most particular to ask about. Did he tell you about Homburg. We had a perfectly lovely time, and mamma never knew. Why didn't he come to-day? I'm real disappointed, d'you know? I suppose t'was he thought of all this? Say . . . he *is* 'cute, ain't he?'

'Of course he wouldn't appear here,' I answered. 'The show was only for women.'

'Yes. . . . So I see. Pity you didn't ask a few men just to make it lively. Those liveried maids of yours are scrumptious. . . . No mistake. I'd make mamma have ours dressed like that, only the worst of it is she will have men servants. You see out our way we can't get 'em, 'cept blacks, and so it's a novelty. She'd sooner have one of those plush and satin and powdered giants than a diamond coronet, would mamma. I guess it's partly 'cause she can't keep a coronet on her head. I've seen her practising, but it won't

stop nohow, and she does look a store figure in it, I can tell you.'

She laughed loudly and turned her attention to some of Fuller's dainties on the buffet.

'Just you tell that dear man I missed him awfully,' she said, turning to me again with her mouth full of *fondants*. 'I'll have to call around, I s'pose. I want him to come down to Lady Persiflage's country house and help with some theatricals. I as good as promised him, and he must come. He's the very man. I told Lady Per. all about him. She's dying to know him. She's a little bit—well, lively, but such a good sort. You can do most anything you like down at her place. It's the only one of your country houses I care to go to. But I'm keeping you, I see. Ta-ta! . . . I'll look in to-morrow. Tell Wildash so.'

It occurred to me that Homburg had something to be answerable for, if this was the state of intimacy. However, I had to smile and talk 'shop,' and flatter and be flattered, and make appointments until my head ached.

Still, the afternoon had been an enormous success, and in spite of what it had cost I saw our money repaid cent. per cent. before long.

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'A year ago,' I said to myself to-night, as, tired but exhilarated and hopeful, I sat before my bedroom fire, and cast my thoughts back over the events of the past twelvemonth, 'a year ago since I contemplated my sign, and started this business. What a difference now! I am sought after—I am the fashion—I am a person of consequence. Duchesses listen to my advice, and the smartest women are those I dress. In a few years I shall have made a fortune, or at least sufficient to retire upon. My credit will soon be good for thousands instead of hundreds—and then—'

I leant back and grew comtemplative over the various uses of money.

After all, riches didn't seem of much use to rich people. The wealthiest were the slaves of their wealth, ruled by obligations, harassed by laws of investment, hampered by restrictions and forced to live for society and please it, in order to prove that they possessed the means of doing so. The richer you were the more people expected of you. To please them you must spend money on them. A millionaire's home is merely the house that his money advertises. Every detail has L.S.D. at the

back of it. True, if you have taste as well as wealth, you can get much pleasure out of art, and indulge the costliest whims of decorative science. But even then, rooms and pictures and furniture are unstable comforters.

The best things in life are beyond mere money to buy—love, health, sympathy, friendship, happiness. Imitations of each and all you may purchase, but the real thing—no. There your poorer brother has the advantage. There is nothing to be gained by flattering *him*. Nature gives him brains and health and good digestion, and perhaps simple tastes. He can prove the worth of friendship, and win the heart he loves and know himself beloved for his own sake alone. Distrust leaves him untroubled, and faith and honesty are not mere words, but proven virtues.

On the whole the compensations of life are more evenly balanced than we are inclined to believe !

I yawned after this dose of philosophic reflections, and closed my diary on a few pencilled entries.

I went to bed wondering why Josey Peck wanted Wildash to go down to Lady Persiflage's country house ; wondering more whether he would go, and feeling blissfully certain that Frou-Frou et Cie. would be the talk of London on the morrow.

CHAPTER XV

FOR the next week orders simply poured in.

I hardly knew what to promise or undertake, so great was the demand for Frou-Frou's costumes.

'My dear creature,' exclaimed an eager claimant—a juvenile dowager of some sixty summers—'I simply must have one of your gowns for the Countess of W——'s dinner next week. You know what an artistic soul she is! . . . They do say she designs her own dresses. Never leaves it to her *modiste*. Well, I *do* want the triumph of showing her someone else can dress as originally as herself. Simply *tack* it together, never mind the sewing, it can come back for that afterwards. Pin it on me if you like, but a gown of yours it must be. I want it copied from that model I saw yesterday.'

'Why not have the model itself?' I suggested.

(It was intended for a woman of twenty-five, or thereabouts.)

‘Then you can be certain of the gown. I hardly know how to promise a duplicate in such a short time.’

‘But would it fit?’ she asked dubiously. ‘It was worn by rather a—a slight figure, wasn’t it?’

‘It can be easily altered.’

‘And the price?’

‘Ninety-five guineas. Of course the alterations would not be charged for, if you take the gown.’

She decided she would take it, and oh! what a sight she looked in it. But to her own idea she was perfect. Another peculiarity of women is that they take violent fancies to perfectly unsuitable articles of attire, forgetting that the beauty of the thing itself loses all its charms if worn by the wrong person.

The gown and the wearer must match in style, colouring, and design, or the result is inartistic.

Had the dowager been one of my regular customers I would not have permitted her to wear this model, but I knew she had only come for a freak, and there was little credit to be gained by dressing her. I was glad, too, to be able to dispose of one of the many model gowns necessary for that exhibition of mine. They had cost an

enormous amount of money, or at least would cost it. As yet they were unpaid for.

However, that fact sat lightly on my conscience as orders poured in. I had to engage a larger staff, having now four bodice hands, six skirt, and three sleeve workers. I still undertook most of the fitting, though I had an excellent assistant in that line, but I was resolved on keeping up the prestige of the establishment.

To me 'cut' was a sort of inspiration. I could have promised to fit almost any figure by merely looking at the proportions and then turning to scissors and lining, just as an artist would turn to pencil and cardboard. Practice had added certainty and accuracy to this gift, and I began to realise its value.

'We shall do,' said Wildash, triumphantly, as the dowager's cheque came by return. 'You must sell all those models, Mrs Costello. It'll be a quick profit for us. I have an idea that Lady Persiflage will take one or two. She's coming for the dresses for her private theatricals. Sell her that tea-gown. It's just her style.'

'She's Josey Peck's friend, is she not?'

'Yes, and the lively American wants me to go down to her country place and assist. Sort

of stage manager. I expect it will be great fun. I wish you were coming too.'

I laughed. 'I have quite enough of these people in my fitting-rooms,' I said. 'I assure you, when one has studied a woman's whims and tempers and foibles in the capacity of dress-maker, one doesn't feel inclined to pursue the experiment any further.'

'I suppose they do bother you a lot,' he said commiseratingly. 'Poor little woman—and you're so kind-hearted. I declare sometimes when I think of their airs and graces, I feel inclined to treat them to a "lash of my tongue," as they say in Ireland.'

'Being a dressmaker means a liberal education in patience,' I said, laughing. 'I'm getting quite used to humbug. It wouldn't do to treat everyone as you do the Pecks, Harry.'

He had begged me to drop the 'Mr' long ago, and I was nothing loth. There are people whom you are irresistibly compelled to call by their Christian names, and others to whom the more formal surname clings through a life-long acquaintanceship.

It was late in the afternoon when this conversa-

tion took place. Outside, the fog brooded clammy and dark over everything. Within my room was the cheery glow of fire and rose-shaded light.

I had just rung for tea, congratulating myself the day's work was over. The hour and the weather were against any callers.

I gave Wildash some tea, and had just poured out a cup for myself when the door opened and in rustled a very pretty dark woman, tall and elegant, and beautifully dressed. Following her was Josey Peck.

'Well, I guess you do look comfortable, you two,' said that lively young lady, 'Lady Persiflage has come with me to talk over those theatricals of hers.'

I rose and bowed. 'May I offer you some tea?' I asked.

'I guess we won't mind anything that'll wash the fog out of our throats,' said Josey, as Wildash handed them chairs.

'We're taking you very unceremoniously, Mrs Costello,' said the pretty woman. 'But Miss Peck insisted on bringing me in.'

She had rather a loud voice, and a quick, restless way of looking about at everything. I noted approval of Wildash in a glance that took him in from

top to toe. His handsome face and perfectly fitting clothes evidently pleased her critical eye.

‘How very charming your rooms are! I’ve heard a lot about them, especially since your Model “At home.” Sounds like those things they send circulars about for, doesn’t it? I’m so sorry I wasn’t there. So original, I hear. Everyone’s talking of it.’

‘Your idea, I bet,’ observed Josey, looking at Wildash.

‘Partly,’ he said. ‘But Mrs Costello had the carrying out of it.’

‘Yes. I saw you didn’t turn up. I was just mad, I can tell you. No one to make fun of the people. Oh! and you would have had some opportunities! Has mamma been here lately, Mrs Costello?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Not for a long time.’

‘She ain’t none too pleased with us,’ said the frank-souled American, indicating Wildash. ‘Heard about our biking at Homburg. Read me the riot act, I can tell you. Just as if I cared. But here I’m running on and we must talk business. Now, Lady Per., it’s your turn. Get in your oar while you can, or I’ll be doing it for you.’

Lady Persiflage put down her tea-cup, and glanced at my partner.

‘I’m having a house party next month,’ she said. ‘And we are going to do one or two little modern plays. None of the old tragedy things—“Lady of Lyons” and “Still Waters run Deep”—only bright, airy, up-to-date trifles. But I want them superintended by someone whose taste is accurate and original. To do them as no one else has ever done them. . . . Strike a new note, in fact. From what I’ve heard of this establishment, and of you, Mr Wildash, I fancy you’re the very people to carry out my ideas. Mrs Costello will do the dresses, I hope, and you I shall ask to stage manage for us. Don’t say it’s not in your line, or rather *say* it, for I wouldn’t have the conventional thing for any consideration. I don’t mind telling you I’ve written one of the pieces myself. It only takes three people to act—three people and a footman. It was hearing Miss Peck talk of you that made me feel certain you were the very man to suggest, or superintend, and all that. It’s so hard,’ she went on piteously, ‘to find any sort of originality at all. Now that “At home” with the living models and the music, *that* was original if you like. Immedi-

ately I heard of it I said to Miss Peck, "I must try and get him for my theatricals," and here I am.'

'So I observe,' said Wildash, coolly. 'But, really, theatricals are not at all in my line.'

'Oh! don't say that. I've counted upon you. I don't want any of those dreadful professional people. They turn us all into sticks, and make us so unnatural—oh, please don't be disobliging. No one ever says "No" to me.'

'Then an Irishman mustn't be the first,' said Wildash, smiling. 'Only, really, it's not quite clear what you want me to do. I can't paint scenery, you know, and though I do a theatre at least once a week I've never seen a rehearsal, or put anyone through their paces.'

'That's why it will be so delightfully original,' cried Lady Persiflage, clasping her hands.

'You must say what sort of dresses, and what sort of room'—(she glanced round approvingly) 'and make them walk and talk like real people. Not stagey donkeys, who move as if they were under a drill sergeant's eyes, and mouth their words, and smirk and grin, and that sort of thing. I'm intensely dramatic myself, but I want someone to back me up and *make* the others think as I do.

They can all act, but the difficulty is to get them *not* to act. Do you understand?’

‘Perfectly. But I should be better able to assist you if you could let me see your play.’

‘Oh! it’s not *that*. It’s only a little comedietta—three characters, as I told you—’

‘*And*—a footman.’

‘Yes. Fancy your remembering that. Josey, the manuscript is in the carriage pocket—would you—’

‘Could I find it?’ asked Wildash, rising.

‘So kind of you, but don’t trouble. Josey knows just where it is. And now, Mrs Costello, when may I see you about dresses. I want a tea-gown. I play my part in that. A *creation* of a tea-gown, you understand?’

Harry’s glance spoke ‘model,’ and I assured her I had the very thing—so new, so *chic*—but she must see it. Leaving Wildash therefore to entertain Josey I took her off to the other room, and the box containing our exhibit gown was brought in, and the treasure displayed.

She bought it on the spot, making me promise that I would not copy it for anyone else. The charge for such exclusiveness was high.

I had never made a more profitable bargain.

CHAPTER XVI

December 20th.—Busy weeks . . . weeks crammed with orders, obligations, fault-findings, tempers, disputes, all the side-lights that feminine caprice can throw on the all-important duty of attiring itself in fine raiment.

I am tired and weary of it all, and Wildash is away. He departed last week for Thornhill Manor, Lady Persiflage's country house in Berks, and, from his letters, seems to be having an uncommonly good time of it. I miss him more than I could possibly have imagined. It seems so strange to have no one to consult, or to interview travellers (that *bête noir* of the fashionable *modiste*), or advise customers. I never knew how many worries and bothers he had lifted off my shoulders till now. I marvel how I ever got on without him!

'Behind the scenes' of any profession, business, or public employment has always its disenchanting side. I had the quarrels and jealousies

of the workroom as well as the showroom to combat. My chief assistant was, fortunately, possessed of an angelic temper, but she was the exception. Wrangling and back-biting, 'tiffs' and tongue slashing, made things lively for all of us only too often, and when I gave 'a piece of my mind' to any of the culprits it was no uncommon thing to see them fling down their work and march off, with the information that places as good as mine were to be had for the asking. A *contretemps* of this sort, in the midst of a large wedding order, was enough to upset anyone's temper, and I am afraid I lost mine oftener than was diplomatic.

The reverse side of the shield showed itself to me in such fashion that I found myself calculating the shortest available time in which I could furnish myself with a 'retiring' pension. Anything more trying to nerves, health and temper, than the life of a fashionable dressmaker I cannot imagine, and I could not picture my powers of endurance holding out for many years.

In the midst of a despondent mood of this description I one day received a letter from Lady Persiflage to this effect:—

‘DEAR MRS COSTELLO,—We want you to run down for the theatricals on Christmas Eve . . . if only to see we *do* wear our gowns properly and are a credit to the artiste who composed them. Mr Wildash is simply the life and soul of things here! And he does make us *work*. The play is going beautifully, and as for the “original” things he makes us do, and the way he has arranged the stage . . . well, but you’ll see for yourself. He says he can’t get on without you, so I promised to write. The 3.15 train will bring you down in time for tea on the 24th, and I hope you can stay over Boxing Day, for you won’t be required, you know, and a little change will do you good. Mind we shall expect you.—Yours sincerely, LAURA J. PERSIFLAGE.’

The tone of this letter surprised me. It was not often that my customers remembered that a *modiste* might still be a lady, or had started life in the latter capacity before trying the former.

From the fact of Lady Persiflage writing to me as to her equal (which little fact I put down to Wildash), I felt sure my birth and history had not wanted for skilful embroidering at my partner’s

hands. I laughed softly as I pictured him in that house, dominating and controlling everyone in that cool, audacious fashion of his. The life and soul of all the fun, and yet keeping his head, and watching his opportunities — for future occasions.

I accepted the invitation even before I had his letter respecting it, and giving me what he called the 'lie of the land.' This consisted of a description of the various guests, and sundry little *histoires*, witty and naughty and risky enough, but sufficient to show I had nothing to fear by comparison. So Babette the faithful packed my trunk, and I dismissed my quarrelsome assistants with thankfulness, and left her and the page in charge of my establishment.

It was a cold, wet evening when I arrived at the little country station mentioned by Lady Persiflage. A carriage was waiting for me, and about half an hour's drive brought me to the house. It was too dark to judge of its external appearance. I was shown into the hall, where a bright wood fire burnt in the stately fireplace. I had a vision of old carved oak, and brasses, and embossed shields.

A crowd of people were there. Women in tea-gowns, or coats and skirts, as if they had just come in from park or covert; several men stood about with cups in their hands. Among them Wildash. He looked by far the handsomest and most distinguished of them all. Lady Persiflage greeted me very cordially—so did Miss Calhoun, and Josey Peck. The other women were inclined to be supercilious. After one brief regard they turned to their tea-cups and muffins, chattering like sparrows on a house-top. Lady Persiflage gave me some tea and spoke of my journey, and murmured how good it was of me to come down at such short notice.

I inquired after the rehearsals, and was told they were all perfect in their parts, and only longing to prove to the county how vastly superior the amateur was to the 'real' thing.

I caught Wildash's eye, and if he did not wink the intention was self-evident. He found me a chair, and brought hot tea-cake, and declared himself unfeignedly glad to see me again.

'We had the dress rehearsal last night,' he said. 'I shall be glad when it's all over. I'm getting sick of the business.'

‘Were you as impudent to the amateur actress as you are to my *clientèle*?’ I asked him.

‘Sometimes. When they tried me too far, or wanted to flirt in the midst of business. Women never seem to believe that there is a time to sink personality, as well as to obtrude it.’

‘And how do you get on with the men?’

‘Well enough. They’re mostly out shooting, or hunting. But as I tell a good story, and never shirk cards, they’re uncommon civil. At first they were inclined to ignore me as an unknown quantity, but I soon altered that.’

‘And how goes on *l’affaire* Josey?’ I asked.

‘It stands where it was as far as I am concerned.’

‘Who is that tall, pretty woman over there, leaning against the fireplace?’

‘*Très simple, mais très bien.* That is Mrs Tresyllian. Worth dresses her—good style. Husband—city or something. Stock Exchange, I expect. Rolling in money. She acts the best of the lot.’

‘Better than our hostess?’

‘Yes—only it doesn’t do to say so. She is quite capable of the real thing should she ever be driven to it.’

‘Is her husband here?’

‘No. I wrote you that they were never seen together—at country houses. A country house like this, especially.’

‘Why—this?’

He laughed. ‘It is one favoured by semi-detached couples. Oh! perfectly innocent and right, but with such convenient arrangements for—unobserved intercourse!’

‘How many scandals have you unearthed here?’ I inquired, laughing.

‘Too many to tell you in one evening.’

‘Good gracious!’

‘You may well start. I seem to have an unfortunate knack of discovering things. And some people are veritable ostriches. Can I get you any more tea?’

‘No, thank you. I will go to my room now, I think.’

‘Any new gowns?’

‘One—I’ll sport it to-night in honour of the theatricals.’

‘You’re looking a little tired, he said. ‘Have you had a bad time of it since I left?’

‘Indeed, yes. The workroom people were so

troublesome and there was so much to finish before Christmas.'

Well, a few days' rest will set you up—at least if they'll let you rest here. As a rule they're all on the go from morning till night. No one goes to bed before one, or two.'

At this moment Josey Peck approached.

'I'll take you to your room if you like,' she said. 'Lady Persiflage has given you the one next mine.'

I rose at once, not sorry to get away and have a chance of rest before dressing for dinner.

'Momma ain't here,' Miss Josey informed me, as I threw off my travelling wraps and looked round the pretty, chintz-covered room. 'I got her asked to a duchess's place way down Warwickshire. I *had* to come here because I'm acting in Lady Per.'s play. Always call her that. Life ain't long enough for such double-barrelled names as she holds on to.'

'It's a new title, but they're an old family,' I observed.

'Oh! your old families! I guess I'm sick of hearing about them. The decent ones are as poor as rats, and the others always mortgaging and

selling things, including themselves. Did you hear I'd refused Lord Pelham?'

'No; was it in the *Court Circular*?'

'That's real smart, but I don't bear you any grudge. I guess I can take my dollars to a better market. Besides, he drinks like a bargee.'

'Our aristocracy seem singularly adapted for republican favours,' I observed. 'Their principles and constitutions are equally weak.'

'Wal, I guess your present earls and dukes ain't much like the pictures of their ancestors in the painting galleries. Maybe it's the wigs or the armour made *them* look important. I wouldn't have minded marryin' one, but there ain't nothing about titled folks now to show they're different to ordinary ones. Indeed, the ordinary look the aristocrats. See Wildash now. He's all right. No need to worry about *his* descent. Looks blue blood all through. You never see him drunk, and these other men, why, they just *soak*. You'll see to-night. It's awful. I do hate to see a man in liquor, don't you, Mrs Costello?'

I agreed.

'He's a darling man,' she went on, with a sigh

‘If only he’d get a title I’d jump at him. I’ve dollars enough, but mamma would be just mad if I was plain Mrs. I could have been that in New York.’

‘Tell me,’ I said, ‘do *all* you American girls come over to this country with the idea of “catching a title?” It looks like it.’

‘Wal, I guess we do look around with that view,’ she said frankly. ‘Seems kind of funny, don’t it? But your people began it. They made such an almighty fuss over us Americans, and we could cheek them as we liked, and yet princes and peerages and all that sort simply cottoned to us. We didn’t understand it at first. Guess we look upon it as our right now.’

I leant back in my chair and surveyed the frank young republican with some amusement.

I knew that the Peck dollars had sprung from a very unsavoury source; that Josey herself had been nothing particular in her own country, where her family history was only a startling transformation scene. And to see her here, perfectly at home among people of birth and race, and critical as to ducal suitors, was just one of those ‘eye openers’ that society seems to delight in.

I was silent so long that she concluded I was tired, and after offering the services of her maid, which I declined, she took herself off.

I threw on a loose wrapper and lay down for half an hour. Rest, and a subsequent douche of cold water and eau-de-Cologne were my unfailing recipes for the nerves and complexion.

When I went down to dinner I had the satisfaction of meeting many surprised and admiring glances.

Lady Persiflage was talking and laughing at the top of her voice. 'Let's have a scramble to-night,' she said. 'We are rather late as it is, and I can't waste more time in sorting you out. Take who you please, and follow me. Come, Mr Wildash, I choose you.'

She darted off, laughing and chattering, and there was a general rush and scrimmage in the hasty choice of partners.

A voice in my ear said suddenly, 'Mrs Costello, allow me to take you in.'

I looked up, surprised, into the face of Captain Calhoun.

CHAPTER XVII

THERE was a good deal of noise and confusion before the various couples were seated, and at their soup.

I turned to my neighbour. 'Is this a new fashion?' I inquired.

'Oh, it's been in some time, I believe. Rather good fun, don't you think? One does get a chance of sitting next the person one wants, instead of doing duty by right of precedence. Lady Per. often does it.'

I declined soup, and looked thoughtfully round the table. The new fashion seemed to have suited them all amazingly, judging from appearances. Josey Peck had managed to secure a seat the other side of Wildash, and emulated Lady Per.'s pert chatter so skilfully that he had only to listen to both with equal indifference. I wondered at the absence of Lady Farrington. When certain members of society 'hunt in

couples,' one naturally looks for that partnership on such occasions as the present.

'How well your sister is looking,' I observed, when my scrutiny had satisfied me.

'Yes, she keeps up wonderfully, doesn't she? Time's getting near now.'

'The duke is not here?' I questioned.

'No. Deeds and settlements and things, and a slight touch of gout. He's at the Castle. Wanted us for Christmas, but not this child, thank you. I like to go where I know I'll be amused.'

'It's very lively here, I suppose?'

'Rather, he said with emphasis. 'Liberty Hall if you like.' Then, after a pause, he said in a low tone, 'You've no idea how glad I was to hear you were coming. I never got the chance of a word with you in town.'

I stared at him in surprise. Then I laughed. 'I was not aware you had any special reason for a word with me. Surely Miss Calhoun—'

'It's not about her, and do drop "shop," like a dear creature. I never can and never shall associate you with business. Seems sacrilege, you know. There's no woman I've ever admired so much.'

My amazement increased. To it was added a slight indignation.

‘You flatter me,’ I said, with some hauteur. ‘And please remember I *am* a woman of business, as you call it, and any form of admiration must be strictly professional.’

He laughed. ‘A pretty woman can never be wholly and entirely a business woman. Her glass won’t let her, and men have eyes !’

‘I don’t deny that. But supposing she doesn’t attach any importance to—optical delusions ?’

‘She wouldn’t belie her sex by such an immoral proceeding.’

‘I think, Captain Calhoun, that men don’t understand my sex so well as they pretend to do. I assure you there are many things more gratifying and more important than the admiration you suggest.’

I was both irritated and astonished at his manner. It conveyed to me something I had no desire to have explained.

‘Where is Lady Farringdon ?’ I went on hurriedly. ‘I fully expected to find her here.’

He frowned slightly. ‘She is doing a round of visits also. She is due here first week of the new year.’

‘And you talk like this *pour passer le temps* ?’

‘That’s a base insinuation. I’ve known you a year, and my admiration dates its birth from our first meeting.’

‘Indeed! That does not speak well for your constancy, Captain Calhoun.’

‘You mustn’t believe there’s anything in those stories,’ he said, a dark flush rising to his brow. ‘We’re very good friends, and I’ve known her years and years, but there’s nothing else.’

A scream of laughter from the other side of the table interrupted us. Calhoun frowned.

‘Wildash is a perfect Merry Andrew,’ he muttered. ‘He plays court jester, morning, noon, and night. Lady Per. spoils him. As for that American girl, she almost throws herself at his head. I don’t know what they see in him, unless it’s his consummate cheek.’

‘Isn’t that the chief element of modern popularity?’

‘Oh! I forgot, you and he are great pals. Partner or something, isn’t he?’

‘Yes. He has simply doubled my income and connection.’

‘There’s a lot to be made out of it, I suppose, if one knows the ropes.’

‘A fortune,’ I said quietly.

He looked enviously at Wildash.

‘He’d give it up, I suppose, if he came into the title. It would be rather *infra dig.*, wouldn’t it?’

‘That’s a matter of opinion. The Countess of Warwick has her name over a shop. A relative of the Royal family is in the tea trade. Lord Rosslyn is an actor; the Duchess of Sutherland an authoress; Countess Russell a music-hall singer; the German Emperor a dramatist and composer—Wildash will be in good company even if he has the misfortune to become a baronet.’

‘It was a queer idea all the same.’

‘It was an inspiration of genius. It is not what a man does, but what he *is* that degrades or ennobles him.’

‘You’re one of his champions, I see, Mrs Costello.’

‘I certainly consider his life more useful than that of half the men of the present day. Men who are less intellectual than apes, and not half as amusing. Who call it “honour” to gamble away their ancient homes and cheat their tradesmen, and whose sole notion of love is to compromise married women!’

‘Great Scot! What an indictment!’

He refused the *sorbet*, and turned to look at me.

‘Do you really mean all that?’ he asked.

‘You can’t deny its truth.’

‘No—’pon my soul I can’t. But it sounds so—old fashioned and churchy to hear a woman talk like that.’

‘Does it?’ I said. ‘Well, put it down to my ignorance. I am not “in” society, only a looker-on.’

‘That’s why you see most of the games?’

‘Exactly. They are very amusing sometimes; also they teach a moral lesson.’

‘Moral lesson?’ he repeated vaguely.

‘Yes—of avoidance. I wouldn’t be in one of those games, not for all the Peck dollars, Captain Calhoun.’

He finished his dinner in silence after that.

.
There was a general movement when Lady Persiflage rose.

Almost everyone was engaged in the theatricals, and all were anxious about the dressing. She seized upon me as her own particular adviser in the matter of ‘make up,’ and I gave my services to her and Mrs Tresyllian, who dressed in the same room. I was lost in admiration of this woman. She was absolutely lovely, and the personification of grace. It was a pleasure to dress her, and decidedly I envied Worth.

Lady Persiflage was refreshing her memory, and rattling off speeches and 'cues' in a most bewildering fashion.

'Will it go, Tessie, do you think?' she asked her friend anxiously. 'I shall die of vexation if it doesn't.'

Mrs Tresyllian opined that it would be all right, as she surveyed her profile with a hand-glass.

'There's a lot of people coming,' continued Lady Persiflage. 'I told Pops to receive them.' (Pops was the individual who had the honour of being her husband.) 'He won't like it, of course, but I couldn't rush my dressing for a lot of county fogies. Men are so abominably selfish, don't you think so, Mrs Costello? Oh, you're lucky, you're a widow. . . . Isn't that eyebrow a little . . . little. . . .? No, you think not? Very well—I depend on you. Now, I'll stand under the light, and you go to the other end of the room and tell me how I look.'

'Charming,' was my verdict, as I obeyed her wishes. 'If you act as well as you look, the piece will be a success,' I added.

She laughed gaily. 'Oh! Wildash is a splendid prompter. Indeed, he's an encyclopædia of useful knowledge—nothing comes amiss. He knocked

up some Cairo screens, and enamelled some old chairs for the stage into dreams of beauty, and the way he's done the room — isn't it too sweet for anything, Tessie ?'

'He has great inventiveness,' said Mrs Tresyllian; 'it almost amounts to a talent. And a wonderful memory.'

'Yes, he can tell us all our parts without the book. How goes the time, Tessie? We begin at nine-thirty, don't we?'

'It's almost on the stroke. I'm quite ready if you are.'

They gave a last anxious look at the mirror, gathered their trains, and 'parts,' and swept out of the room.

I followed them and found a seat with some difficulty. Most of the people had arrived, and 'Pops' had conscientiously received and seated them. There was no orchestra, but a piano duet gave forth the overture to 'Tannhäuser,' and almost on the last chord the curtain divided on either side the stage, and showed the 'boudoir of Lady St Pierre's town house,' so said the programme.

It was really a charming little play and wonderfully well acted. Lady Persiflage was so suited to

her own part that she had only to be herself. Mrs Tresyllian struck a deeper note, and acted with almost professional ability. I am not quite sure that the county quite grasped the plot, or understood half the 'smart' things the characters said, but they laughed a good deal and applauded graciously, and seemed quite surprised at the shortness of the piece and the magnificence of the gowns.

I fancy the tea-gown shocked one or two matrons, but then some people's nerves are so sensitive that very little upsets them. For my part I enjoyed the performance immensely.

There was to be an interval of twenty minutes between the little comedy and the next piece. They had chosen 'Lady Windermere's Fan' for the latter.

I knew no one near me, so, under cover of the talk and laughter, I rose and made my way to the hall, where coffee was being served. Here Wildash joined me—cool and unruffled, and apparently heedless of responsibilities.

I congratulated him on his qualifications for stage managership.

'It was hard work, I can tell you,' he answered. 'I'm going to have a whisky and soda and a cigarette, to keep me up between the parts.'

They're all worrying about their wigs. Clarkson sent the wrong sort, or something. I left them to fight it out. I've just about had enough of it. Josey was very "cute" in her part, wasn't she ?'

'Excellent,' I agreed. 'Oh ! here she comes.'

'Then I'm off,' and he slipped away.

The little American came in, followed by a crowd of men, with whom she kept up a running fire of conversation.

She had not removed her 'make up' and wore the same dress. As it was one of my own creations, I was qualified to admire it.

'That will do,' she said to one of her following. 'You can catch up your resolutions at leisure. It's quite plain you know nothing about *my* part in the play, or you wouldn't have said I was "awfully good." I was bad . . . downright bad. Adventuress, and all that. Tessie Tresyllian was the good woman. Oh ! Mrs Costello, where's Wildash ? I *do* want to shake hands with him. He pulled me through just wonderful. . . . Not here ? I call that a shame. Well, I'm going to smoke. No coffee, thanks. Keeps me awake, and we've all got to show up at church to-morrow—Lady Per. insists. It's the

one day in the year she must grace the family pew—house-party, servants and all. Guess I'm goin' for the experience. I haven't spent an English Christmas yet. What do you all do when the bells ring at midnight?'

'Kiss under the mistletoe,' said Captain Calhoun.

'Guess you don't kiss this child. She draws the line at anything promiscuous.'

She lit a cigarette, and blew a cloud of smoke from her saucy lips. Then perched herself on the edge of a table, and swung her tiny high-heeled shoes to and fro for all beholders to marvel at.

'She's a true child of her country, isn't she?' murmured Calhoun, drawing closer to me. 'Awful fun to draw her out. Level-headed as they make them. Got a coronet in her eye, and won't take anything less. "Haloos," she calls 'em. Asked my sister if she was going to wear hers at her wedding. What ideas they have!'

'How did you like the comedy?' I asked.

'Not half bad. Lady Per.'s clever, ain't she? Fancy writing and acting *that*.'

'Marvellous,' I said dryly. 'As surprising as if a butterfly took to making honey.'

‘Well, it is. Because she’s no need to do it, and writing’s precious hard work. At least I find it so. Always shirk letters.’

I looked at him. Six foot of ornamental bone and muscle, good for shooting, hunting, billiards and baccarat, smokes and drinks, and unequal to the task of composing or writing an ordinary letter.

‘I’m an awfully lazy beggar,’ he went on confidentially. ‘I say, Mrs Costello, come out of this crowd. I want to talk to you. You did pitch into me at dinner, but I bear you no ill-will.’

‘That is good of you,’ I said, moving away to a seat near the great fireplace. ‘I’ll promise not to do it again if you’ll behave yourself.’

‘That means—’

‘Not paying me silly compliments.’

‘I won’t,’ he said earnestly. ‘Somehow, you’re different to the others. They expect it. Every observation must have a sugar plum of flattery. One gets into the way of it at last.’

‘I thought even worldly women were wiser than that.’

‘No, they’re not. Because they are worldly.’

I shrugged my shoulders. ‘A synonym for senselessness and exaggeration.’

'You're very hard on your sex, I fancy, Mrs Costello.'

'Perhaps I've opportunities of judging them not given to many. A woman treats her *modiste* as frankly as she does her looking-glass, and the looking-glass *reflects*, you must remember.'

'By Jove—that's clever!' he said admiringly. 'I wonder sometimes you didn't go in for something different from this sort of life, don't you know. Seems you're thrown away on it.'

'What would you suggest in its place—as lucrative, of course?'

'Well, the stage, or writing. Women make pots of money out of a successful book, I hear.'

'Exactly. A successful book. But how many women's books *are* successful?'

He ran over a few names. I laughed. 'I could make the sum they get for a book out of one gown,' I said, 'with less trouble, and less anxiety.'

'No—really. . . . I've heard 'em say—'

'Oh! my dear Captain Calhoun, *never* believe what authors tell you as to the profits of their profession. Go to a publisher if you want to know that.'

'Well—the stage. That pays. And anyone

who looks and acts like a lady is pretty sure of parts in up-to-date comedies.'

'My friend Mrs Abercroft dresses most of the leading actresses,' I said. 'I know quite enough of the stage to make it as undesirable a profession as literature. And why this anxiety on my behalf? I counted the cost well before I took up my present line of business. I have no reason to regret it. There are attendant worries and anxieties—true—but who is without them? Now we have talked quite enough of myself and my affairs. I see a movement to return to the other room. Shall we go?'

He offered me his arm. 'They are to dance afterwards,' he said. 'May I have the honour of the cotillon?'

'It is promised,' I said quietly.

He looked vexed. 'I'm sorry I'm too late. A waltz, then?'

I nodded. 'Yes. I've no programme, but—'

'I'll ask for the first then, and I'll bring you a programme after this piece is over. You couldn't . . . get out of the cotillon engagement?' he questioned.

'I have no wish to. I'm engaged for it to Mr Wildash.'

'Oh! d——n Wildash!' he muttered.

CHAPTER XVIII

I WENT to my room in the early hours, tired yet elated. Not a woman present had received more attention or admiration than myself, and 'who is she?' had hovered on many lips. Wildash had been as amusing and delightful as ever, and both Lady Persiflage and Josey Peck were envious of his devotion to me—if it could be called devotion.

Whatever it looked like to others, to ourselves it was only '*camaraderie*.' We jested, criticised, gossiped and laughed like two children over the guests and incidents of the evening. I had never enjoyed myself so much—never since I had retired from any prominent position in society—that curious institution component of so many sets and layers that one may ascend or descend without fear of recognition from one part, or interference from another.

I was too tired to do anything but go to bed and sleep, and I was none too well pleased at being aroused next morning at ten o'clock,

although my breakfast was brought to me. But Lady Per. had insisted we should all go to church by way of example to the county, and I had faithfully promised to do so.

It was cold and frosty. The sun was shining brightly, and a ten minutes' walk took us to a pretty, old-fashioned building that was suffering desecration from fashionable ritual.

The service and vestments were of the most advanced order. The priests as pompous and self-important as their kind. The service mainly composed of choral singing and eliminations from the old-fashioned form of the Church service; the sermon—a reiteration of fallacies and dogmas—delivered with the eloquence of a Board-school prize pupil.

In London I rarely went to church. It only irritated and amazed me. A modern fashionable preacher would not condescend to explain a doctrine, or give any sort of comfort or aid to a conscientious seeker after truth. He would refer one to 'the Church,' and the Church, in the parlance of a ritualist priest, is about the most comfortless and irreligious institution that modernity has invented.

However, we did our duty 'according to that state of life' in which we were placed, and abused everything soundly on our return journey.

Life in a country house is mainly composed of eating, drinking, and flirting. There came a heavy luncheon, after which the men drifted off to smoking, or billiard-room, or went for a walk, and the women retired to sleep off the previous night's fatigue, till five o'clock allowed of an elaborate display of tea-gowns in the hall.

'Christmas day is always the dullest and most depressing in the whole year,' exclaimed Lady Per., smothering a yawn. 'It is the essence of fifty Sundays rolled into one.'

'I'd read such a lot about English Christmas-time,' cried Josey Peck's shrill voice. 'I guess it ain't much like story-books. No robins hoppin' about; or skatin', and mistletoe boughs! And you all seem kind o' melancholy.'

'We are reviewing our past misdeeds,' said Wildash. 'It is a duty laid upon us by our consciences, and we perform it once a year—generally at Christmas-time. Our self-examination reaches a climax on the last day of the old year, when we fast in sackcloth and ashes till the

midnight hour. As the bells begin to ring we rise to new hopes we never realise; make new vows we never keep; and take into our purified hands the Book of New Leaves that we never turn over.

‘I guess you’re funny people,’ said Josey, regarding him shrewdly. ‘As for you, Mr Wildash, I never do know if you’re poking fun at me, or meanin’ what you say. But I kalkerlate you’d best lose no time in turnin’ over one of those new leaves yourself.’

‘Why? Surely, Miss Peck, you’ve no fault to find with my moral structure?’

‘Wal, I can give a pretty good guess at the amount of “morality” it contains,’ she said. ‘Seems you don’t believe much in men *or* women; ain’t that so?’

‘I believe in them as long as they permit. People cease to interest when we find their—limitations.’

‘How d’you know you’ve reached the end of the rope? Lots of folk only give you a little piece, and hold the rest back for fear of accidents.’

‘Then “lots of folks” seem so fearful of the accident, that they wear out the rope with holding on to it.’

‘Don’t let us get metaphorical. It’s so wearing to the nerves. And that high-and-dry style o’ talkin’ don’t suit me. Bring me another cup of tea and I’ll tell you the last thing I heard about mamma.’

‘Why do American girls always say “momma”?’ asked Captain Calhoun, in a low voice, as he bent down for my empty cup. ‘It sounds so silly.’

‘They’re brought up that way, I suppose. Doubtless our stolid “mother” sounds just as strange to their ears.’

‘What would you all care to do this evening?’ chimed in Lady Per. ‘Dance, charades, cards? We’ve only ourselves, you know. Unless Mrs Jackey Beauchamp comes. She faithfully promised. But one can never depend on her!’

There was a moment of interest.

‘Jackey coming. Oh! how delightful!’

‘Yes. She’s been staying with the Newlands at the Abbey. She wasn’t at church, though. She promised to dine and sleep here to-night.’

‘She never keeps her word,’ murmured Mrs Tresyllian.

‘How did the Newlands get her?’ asked Captain Calhoun. ‘Not quite her sort, are they?’

‘She rather took them up after they bought the Abbey. Detestable people—but oh! their money!’

‘Usual story nowadays,’ drawled the Captain. ‘We’re all selling ourselves for a mess o’ pottage.’

‘They give very good pottage,’ laughed Lady Per. ‘But they’re rather “cut” down here. No one liked the Abbey going out of the family, and though the Beauchamps were short of “shekels” they were very popular.’

‘Beastly pity . . . good families . . . so poor,’ murmured Teddy Fitzgerald, who was a younger son, and in the Guards, and had more debts than he could possibly remember, or ever intended to pay.

He was far too lazy to utter a consecutive sentence, and merely dropped two or three words at intervals when the labour of conversation was forced upon him.

‘It is,’ agreed Mrs Tresyllian. ‘And one hates having these rich surprises sprung on one. I couldn’t believe when I heard the Abbey had been sold.’

‘We’re all asked to the New Year Eve ball,’ said Lady Persiflage. ‘Twill be rather fun, and we needn’t notice them, you know. They’re sure to do the thing well. Anyone want more tea?’

As she asked the question the *portières* were

suddenly swept aside and there entered a woman with a clear-skinned face, very large and brilliant eyes, and an expression and manner that were indescribably impertinent. She was tall and very slight, and round her and about her was that crowning perfection which comes from a thorough knowledge of detail. Her hair, her gown, her gloves, were all of the right stamp of elegance in *mode* and design.

As she stood there, the heavy velvet forming a background for her figure, and her eyes, brilliant and audacious, sweeping the crowd of faces, she made a picture of wonderful effect. Yet only a picture. One seemed to recognise the art and the beauty and the effectiveness, and miss out of it any warmth, or heart, or nature.

Lady Per. sprang to her feet with a cry of delight. 'Why, Jackey!' she exclaimed. 'You don't mean it's you?'

'Yes, my twe-est,' answered the newcomer, suffering herself to be kissed on both her cool white cheeks. 'I couldn't stand the Newsies any longer. It got positively diskie. Yes, really. And how are you all? Tizzy-wizzy . . . that's right. How do, Teddy? And is that my Capty?' (this to Calhoun,

with whom she shook hands at shoulder-angle). 'Looking like Patience on a tombstone, I do declare! Give me some tea, Pussy. I'm frozen with cold.'

She threw off her furs for the nearest man to catch, and sank into a chair by the fire.

I remained outside the group she favoured with her attention, absolutely fascinated by this revelation of *le vrai monde* of whom I had heard a thousand stories.

Mrs Jackey Beauchamp was a social star of great magnitude. Not only was she 'in' everything that was worth being in, but she set particular fashions, and had been crowned queen of a set who were ultra 'smart.' It was for their benefit and guidance she had invented a code of expressions not to be understood of mere outsiders. She was the most noted and the most quoted of celebrities at home, and the *Post* and the *Court Circular* and the *World* and various smaller luminaries of the Press always had her name in their social columns. How she managed to be everywhere and do everything; to ride, golf, skate, dance, drive and dress as she did was one of those marvels fashionable women daily present to the world they rule. But there was no denying she

was a great power. Her terrible extravagances and her load of debts had never cost her a wrinkle, or an anxious hour. Her set adored her. Her nod and smile were the hall-mark of approbation for which no sacrifice was too great. Even when an irate dressmaker had had the audacity to sue her husband for a bill his wife had ignored, and Mrs Jackey had to appear in a public court to be confronted with the extravagant details of her toilettes, her hold on popularity did not suffer. Mr Jack Beauchamp was pronounced a brute and a miser and utterly undeserving of so wonderful a wife. The wonderful wife went to other dressmakers and ran up still more extravagant bills, and left her lord and master to the world's opprobrium, and the solace of other martyred husbands.

No one had skated over thinner ice, or skipped over more dangerous quicksands than Mrs Jackey. She knew all sorts of people, and 'took up' the oddest if they could be of any use to her.

'How can you know such a sweep?' had asked one of her *intimes*, *à propos* of some very objectionable and fabulously rich vulgarian she had asked to dinner.

'My sweeps clean my chimneys,' she had

answered. And the story went round the clubs and endeared her still more to the 'Smarts' and the 'Souls' and the ultra *chic* of her world.

Knowing all these things I naturally was deeply interested in this modern heroine. I wished soon that I owned a social glossary, for the words and expressions falling like hail around me were like an unknown language. When Mrs Jackey spoke of the 'Man-man' I was ignorant that she referred to the Prince; and 'diskie,' and 'expie,' and 'hoy,' and 'tellie' were equally incomprehensible.

Wildash, who sat beside me, silent perforce, was intensely interested in this newcomer. I fancied he was studying her for future use. Her impertinences and audacities rivalled his own.

The way she ridiculed the people with whom she had been staying seemed to me the worst possible taste, but everyone else in the room screamed with laughter, as if it was an excellent joke to satirise people who had lavished their wealth and time and attention upon your entertainment.

She talked at express speed, never at a loss for a word, and rarely waiting for an answer. As she nick-named everyone she knew, it was

difficult to guess whom she meant. I discovered that Lady Per. was 'Pussy,' as a play on the word 'purr,' but some other abbreviations remained a mystery.

There was no doubt, however, about her success, especially with her own sex. *That* at least marked her of no ordinary cleverness, for few popular women are favourites with their less appreciated sisterhood.

'Did you see the Abbey ghost, Jackey?' asked Lady Per. in an interval of comparative silence.

'See it. No. I only played it on my own,' she said. 'Scared them into fittums, poor dears. Old Newsie' (short for Mr Bartholemew Newlands, the new owner of the Abbey) 'had a mania for poking about corridors and places when he wasn't wanted—looking after the heating pipes, he said—scared of fire he was. Just as if he had ancestral rights, instead of being quite un-progy, not even a "granfy" to be traced, you know. Well, I thought I'd scary him a bit. So I covered my face with luminous paint and did myself into a white nightie, and when I knew he'd be coming along, hid behind a curtain and whiffed out his light. Of course he turned, and, heavens above!

the yell he gave would have wakened the dead in the churchyard. He dropped the candle and fled! I slipped back into my room, and presently joined the crowd of hurry-scurries. Newsie took to bed. Believed he'd had a warning. That was two days ago. No one has seen him since.'

'Don't play tricks like that here,' said Lady Per. 'Remember we have a ghost also. It's four hundred years old, I think. It's a man ghost. An old man who holds a lantern and goes peering about the north corridor. However, no one's sleeping there now, so you needn't be skeery.'

'Vote we tell ghost stories after dinner. A prize for the best,' exclaimed Mrs Jackey. 'I only know one, but it's quite too creepy — makes one go goose-skinny all over. Why does one say "goose" skin; why not chicky or turkey?'

'What's the prize to be?' asked Teddy Fitzgerald.

'And who's to give it?' asked Calhoun.

'Oh! Jackey, of course,' said Lady Per., 'and we'll use the cotillon presents. A cigarette case for a man, and a—'

'A case of cigarettes for a woman,' chimed in Mrs Jackey Beauchamp.

‘Ah! there’s the dressing-bell, Jackey; let me show you your room,’ said Lady Per.

Mrs Jackey rose languidly. ‘I always wish you had the Abbey, my twee,’ she said. ‘Much more fitty. To think of Newsie in that lovely old place, and Mrs Newsie, a fat old frump with a soul attuned to water gruel, and hot bottles! So quite too altogether diskie, isn’t it?’

She received her furs from the hands of Teddy Fitzgerald, and left the room with Lady Persiflage.

Wildash looked at me. ‘She’s seen you, but pretends not,’ he said, very low. ‘Look your best to-night. Biz!’

CHAPTER XIX

A SHIMMERING, glittering vision swept into the drawing-room as dinner was announced.

This represented Mrs Jackey Beauchamp in what she termed 'a demi-teagie.' Translated, this appeared as a compromise between tea-gown and evening dress. But it was very exquisite and very self-revealing, and pleased my professional eye immensely.

Somewhat to my surprise, Lady Per. asked Wil-dash to take in the new arrival, and from the opposite side of the table I could see that they were mutually entertaining one another. I was less happily suited, having been told off to the languid Guardsman. I therefore devoted myself to my dinner and—observation.

It was the proverbial Christmas dinner, attended by the proverbial discomfort in the digestive regions. Lady Per. had hot punch brought in with the dessert as a 'corrective,' so she said, and the party waxed noisy and frolicsome in proof of its excellence.

What with cosaques and crackers and punch, it

was quite late before we settled down for the ghost stories. The hall was chosen as being more cosy and free-and-easy than the drawing-room, and the men joined us there with quite remarkable celerity. I put it down to Mrs Jackey Beauchamp's powers of attraction. That wonderful person swept up to me as we were arranging seats and cushions.

'So glad to meet you,' she exclaimed. 'Have heard so much about you in town. That "model reception" was on everyone's tongue. How was it you didn't ask me? Not that I could have come. I was at Monte Carlo. Still, don't forget next time. Pussy showed me the teagie you designed—quite too deevie, I thought. You must do me a smoking coat—I'll give you the idea. I intend to make them the rage this season, and I'll send all my "pals" to you. I get my "cossies" in Paris—I suppose you buy there? Charming—that Irishman—your partner, isn't he? Fancy his going in for dressmaking. Oh! I shall certainly pay you a visit—only you must give me long creddy. My husband's an awful screw. Thinks I can dress on twelve hundred! Ridicky, isn't it?'

'In your position, and with your reputation, it certainly is,' I agreed.

‘Of course. Perfectly diskie what we poor wives have to put up with! Why, “undies” alone run me into hundreds. I always match my gowns; couldn’t wear one unless all the “neathies” were in keeping. Are you staying here long?’

‘I only came down for the theatricals. I return to-morrow night.’

‘Horrid weather for travelling, and everyone away. Why go? So comfy here. And there’ll be no biz worth speaking of. Ah! Pussy, leave that cushion—Bags I.’

She moved away to a divan near the great open fireplace, and threw herself down against a background of orange and terra-cotta, that was an admirable foil to her sleek black head and white skin.

The men by her directions formed a semi-circle round the fire. The lights were lowered, cigars and cigarettes permitted, and the order to commence ghost story No. I. was issued by this dominating power.

It was a very feeble story and very feebly told. Indeed, the first three or four were as inoffensively supernatural as Mr Stead’s ‘Julia.’

Wildash went one better by giving an Irish Banshee story. Then came Mrs Jackey’s one which for

blood-curdling horror was unsurpassable, only it lacked any element of probability, and was evidently a wild exaggeration of traditional materials.

It was close on the stroke of twelve when it fell to Lady Per.'s lot to tell the story of the family ghost, and of all the tales this was listened to with the greatest interest on account of its present and possible associations.

It appeared from the story that a certain lord of the Manor, some four hundred years back, had a very beautiful daughter of whom he was inordinately proud. They were good and staunch Catholics in those days, and to the house came frequently a young and handsome priest of Italian origin. The beautiful daughter was studious, and inclined to emulate the Lady Jane Grey. The priest taught her Latin, and instructed her in such beauties of Italian poesy as had won recognition. She had no mother and her father was unsuspecting. While Francesca and Paolo was being daily enacted, he guessed nothing, and his ignorance might have lasted indefinitely but for an unfortunate circumstance. This was the discovery of a letter slipped between the leaves of a book.

The letter was from the priestly lover, and re-

vealed more than was prudent. The father, aghast and terror-struck, resolved on vengeance. One midnight he waited in an underground passage by which the young priest usually entered. They met face to face—the guilt of one confronting the accusation of the other. Terror-struck, the priest fell on his knees beseeching mercy. His answer was a dagger-thrust in his heart. As he fell the girl came on the scene, and her wail of agony so maddened her father that he turned on her and stabbed her also.

His awful vengeance complete, he put the bodies into a sack and dragged them along the passage to a vault or cellar sunk into the foundations and secured by a massive iron trap-door. He threw them in, locked the door, and returned to his own quarters. Next day he took all his gold and valuables and went abroad, and for years was never heard of. Then an old, decrepit man, bowed and wrinkled and feeble, came back to end his days at the Manor. He was dying, but he would have no priest to shrive him, no masses said for his soul, and with his secret unconfessed he passed out of the life his sin had cursed.

‘And,’ continued Lady Per., dramatically, ‘once in every ten years, on the night of the

anniversary of that crime, it is said he comes back and enacts it again. And woe be to the man or woman who sees that gruesome sight, for it betokens death within the year. Again does that ghostly figure glide down the lonely passage, again does that wail of agony rend the silence, and again does the noise of the faltering footsteps and dragging bodies echo once more over the stones, until all the horror culminates in the clang of that rusty door.'

We all drew our breaths sharp, and an involuntary shudder ran through the circle of listeners.

'But is it really true? Has anyone seen it? Does it still happen?' fell the queries.

'Yes,' said Lady Per., gravely. 'It still happens, and it *has* been seen. We have had a door put at the end of the passage, and the servants are strictly forbidden ever to go there. But one cook I had, who knew nothing of the legend, took it into her head to explore the place while we were away. I don't know how she got the key, or whether she found one to fit the lock, but certainly she went out of her mind with terror. She left the door open and went to bed ; then remembered it and came down to shut it at midnight. It must have been the anniversary. Shrieks reached the servants' quarters, and a frenzied

lunatic was found crouched at the entrance to the passage. I was telegraphed for, and the end was the poor thing had to go to an asylum—she died there.'

'It's awfully gruesome,' said Mrs Jackey, with an effective shudder that set the jewels and sequins of her gown into glittering turmoil.

'But when is the anniversary? You haven't told us.'

'I don't intend to. I'd rather not be responsible for any more lunatics.'

'But, of course, it isn't true,' said Wildash. 'There's no evidence she saw anything. She might have been an hysterical, nervous woman and—'

'That's just it. She wasn't. The most matter-of-fact, prosaic person. Oh, no! it was no case of fancying, I'm sure. But that's enough of ghosts. Let's vote the prize and have some baccarat to wind up the evening. We're all in the doldrums, I do declare.'

'The prize is yours, Pussy, in my opinion,' said Mrs Jackey. 'Yours—for absolute realism. It had the genuine old moated grange and secret chamber horrors about it. I declare I shall feel quite nervous going to bed.'

'Well, it's past midnight, so there's no fear of the ghost to-night,' exclaimed Captain Calhoun.

There was a sigh of relief from several of the women, and even the men turned to the green board with alacrity.

I did not play, but sat out with Josey Peck and one or two of the house party. At last I slipped away, tired and somewhat bored.

A bright fire burned in my room. The curtains were drawn, and everything was luxurious and comfortable. A wide, deeply-padded arm-chair stood near the fireplace, and, after exchanging my evening dress for a quilted dressing-gown, I took a book and settled myself down for half an hour's quiet read. Whether it was the effect of the warmth, or the pleasant sense of fatigue and quiet combined, I hardly know, but my eyes closed and I fell into a deep sleep.

I woke with a start. The candles had burnt very low. The fire was only a mass of dull red embers. I was chilled and uncomfortable, and rose with the intention of going to bed. As I stood before the glass I noted that a certain diamond-hilted dagger I had worn in my hair was no longer there. I searched the chair, the rug, the dressing-table—all the places where it might have fallen. In vain. Nowhere could I find it.

I remembered I had not removed it when I changed my dress. I valued it very highly, and its loss disturbed me so effectually that I lost all inclination to sleep. I remembered the divan on which I had been seated during the story-telling. Perhaps it had dropped out among the cushions. I considered the probability of finding it in the morning, and wondered whether to risk a servant's honesty or go down myself now and search.

It was nearly three o'clock.

I opened the door and looked out. The house was quiet, the lights were extinguished, all save one or two lamps in dark corridors which were left burning all night. I took up my candle and went softly down the stairs. I knew the exact spot where I had been sitting and, leaving my candlestick on one of the tables, I moved swiftly forward and commenced my search.

I moved the top cushion and there, fallen between it and the back of the lounge, glittered my dagger. With a cry of delight I seized it. But the cry was strangled at its birth. I heard beyond me in the dining-room a strange muffled noise. It was as if someone was dragging a heavy weight along the floor.

My heart stood still . . . my limbs seemed frozen

with terror. The story of the ghost rushed back to my memory, and I was powerless to move or cry.

Seconds, moments passed, and still that frozen horror chained me. All will and energy seemed centred in my power of hearing which, grown abnormally acute, intensified those muffled sounds by force of terror.

It seemed to me they came nearer. They approached the door which was only screened from the hall by a heavy velvet *portière*. On that *portière* my eyes rested with an appalling dread of what any moment might reveal. There was silence, then the faint click of a turning handle ; the curtain rustled—moved—divided. Through its folds a face peered.

A faint scream burst from my lips. A light flashed over me, the light of a lantern. As suddenly it was darkened. In two steps the man who held it was at my side. His hand gripped my arm.

‘If you move or cry, I’ll kill you,’ he hissed. ‘But you won’t. You know me—don’t you?’

I shuddered, and my senses reeled. Know him ! . . . curse and bane of my life. Thief, renegade, criminal ! The man I had last seen in a prisoner’s dock sentenced to fifteen years’ penal servitude. . . . My husband !

CHAPTER XX

NOTES FROM MY DIARY

Dec. 27th.—I feel a hundred years older than when I started for Thornhill Manor.

I returned this morning to Bond Street. All is well there, but I myself feel a perfect wreck. I have gone through twenty-four hours of inconceivable torture. I have become 'an accessory' to a burglary, and the burglar is my husband—the man who was the evil genius of my youth, who married me under false pretences, and left me bankrupt in health, wealth and happiness.

He had broken every moral law and not a few of his country's, and at last found himself faced by a deserved penalty. I breathed freely when I knew I was free from him. The years drifted by. Then I heard he had been shot while trying to effect his escape. I began life anew, fired by hope and unquenched energies. I had succeeded, as these pages show. I was growing contented—almost happy. Suddenly I found myself confronted by this spectre of my past. The gruesome horrors of

his life now linked my own to equal horror. I had had to hear of his escape from prison. To listen to the oaths and curses of a hardened gaol-bird, who feared nought, and cared for no one. . . . To connive at his escape from Thornhill Manor, to become in a measure his accomplice, and, at the very turning point of my own career, to know myself at the mercy of a merciless scoundrel. My chances and hopes of an uncontrolled future seemed to vanish into thin air. The breath of such a scandal on my business would scare every customer away. My position and reputation lay at his mercy now, and he would soon discover the fact.

Oh! that night of horror. . . . Shall I ever forget it! I marvel my hair is not snow-white when I think of what I endured.

Then to come down in the morning and face the turmoil and confusion of a discovered burglary! To hear summonses issued for local police, to form one of the gossiping, affrighted, speculating crowd of men and women, who discussed probabilities and theories, and gave idiotic advice, and rushed about to see that their own jewels were safe, and drove poor Lady Per. nearly wild by hysterics and confusion.

Fortunately, in the general confusion, my own

perturbation escaped notice, but oh ! how thankful I was when I found myself back in London, and able to give vent to my feelings in the privacy of my own dwelling.

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Night, and all is quiet, and Babette has attended to my comforts as only a faithful servant can. Night—and I sit here alone to hold counsel with myself and wonder what I had best do.

I seem separated by years from that frivolous, fashion-sated crowd of yesterday. I seem separated by more than years from the hopeful enthusiast whom that sign below represented. Poor Frou-Frou ! I sigh. How long will her glory last now ?

I think of divorce. But divorce means the exposure of a horrible scandal ; divorce will show up the facts of this burglary and prove that I aided a criminal's escape. Divorce will ruin my business for me, and I have no desire to drop into a second-rate *modiste* after the brilliant 'splash' of this last year.

My head aches. My brain is racked. I see the whole fabric of my hopes about to fall to the ground. My courage breaks down, and I abandon myself to despair. The tears well up and flow over.

The door suddenly opens. Babette announces —‘Monsieur Wildash.’

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That was two hours ago. I take up my pen once more to complete this entry.

I lifted a tear-stained face from the page of my recent confessions, and looked at my partner in a sort of hopeless bewilderment.

‘Whatever is the matter?’ he asked anxiously. ‘Nothing wrong since you left?’

‘Everything is wrong,’ I said miserably. . . .
‘Not with the business as yet, but that will come. I—I shall have to give it up.’

‘Give it up!’ he echoed. ‘What on earth do you mean?’

I tried to stay the flow of tears. My plight was so desperate that I had need of wiser counsel than my own. With the courage of despair I told him at last my whole story.

Silently he listened. Silently, but with a deepening gravity of expression—a hurried breath, as I came to the night of the burglary.

‘My God! to think of it. . . . *You* exposed to such peril. . . . Why didn’t you call out? Someone might have heard.’

‘He held a revolver at my head. He swore

he'd shoot me if I moved or spoke. I had to bolt the door and windows after him . . . to help him hand out things to his accomplice.'

'There were two, then?'

'Yes.'

'You poor soul! What a business! Still you needn't be so frightened. They can't hurt you without hurting themselves. And as for that brute— Why on earth didn't you get a divorce as soon as he was convicted?'

'I had no money. It is an expensive proceeding, and most of his—escapades—were in Paris or America. They were not easy to prove.'

He paced the room to and fro; his brow knit, his face pale and anxious.

'He can't interfere with you *here*, you know,' he said presently. 'You can take out a protection order. You can refuse to admit him. The law doesn't allow a renegade husband to claim his wife's money any longer.'

'But he could make a disturbance . . . create a scandal. He is capable of anything.'

'Does he know of this business?'

'Yes. He found it out—goodness knows how!'

'You could put the police on his track.'

'It would seem so horrible to do that. He

told me something of what his life had been in prison—a life that makes men criminals, and criminals devils, if ever they taste freedom again !’

‘I can believe that. I know something of state prisons in France and in Ireland. Well, my dear, something has got to be done. It *must*. I can’t have you bullied and terrified like this. There’s too much at stake now. Besides, I’m . . . I’m too fond of you to let your life lie at the mercy of such a brute.’

I looked up—startled and surprised. His eyes met mine, and by some uncontrollable impulse I rose to my feet. His arms went round me. Very gently he drew me into that strong and tender embrace. My head fell on his shoulder. The strength, the protection, the peace of it all swept over me like a flood. The checked tears streamed from my eyes, and he just let me cry there, as a wearied and overwrought child might have cried in safe and sheltering arms.

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He has gone, and, worn and spent by emotions, I try to collect my scattered energies once more.

I am confronted by a new difficulty. My love for Harry and his for me.

Suddenly the truth has flashed on us both. We

are more than friends. We have drifted unconsciously into deeper depths of feeling than we had supposed possible. The shock and surprise once over, a douche of common sense has brought me back to myself. Into what new danger and trouble have I allowed myself to drift? I am not free. I cannot marry him.

There lie the facts in the proverbial nutshell ; and I say them over and over again to the rhythmic throb of aching temples and aching heart.

My hatred of the man who has wronged me increases the more I think of him. So bitter, so fierce, so desperate do I grow in course of self-communing, that I almost feel it is in me to give him up to justice. A line to a magistrate, a hint of his whereabouts, and the law would again hold him safe and sound. The fact of his escape would add fresh penalties, and entail a yet more severe sentence, and I . . . I should be free of this hourly dread.

But even as I think of possible relief I know it isn't in me to gain it by such a mean trick. The little he had told me of the horrors of prison life—the change it had already wrought in what had once meant a 'gentleman'—all stood in array before me, and sapped both strength and courage. I saw him as he had been when I first knew him—

handsome, light-hearted, debonair; reckless, it is true, and with a record, even then, that would not bear close scrutiny, but still, what a contrast to the evil-looking, hunted reprobate who had descended so terribly low in the social scale as to break into houses and steal silver.

I shuddered and sprang to my feet in a sort of desperation. I was fast in a net. There seemed no way of escape. Harry could not help me, and his love was but an added danger. The thought of it maddened me. I had not realised what he had become till that moment when I rested in his arms, and recognised something of the strength and passion of his feelings by the response of my own. I knew not only how much I loved him, but how jealous I had been of other women, and his too evident attraction for them. And yet I must forego my triumph, and my love both, by reason of this sorry trick of fate.

To-morrow I must begin work. To-morrow I must interview customers, attend to orders, see to the hundred and one details of my business. To-morrow I must see Harry under these altered circumstances . . . to-morrow, and many succeeding to-morrows will make my path thorny with difficulties. I shall have to battle with the

weakness of my own heart, the jealousy of others, the unsatisfactory position I hold with regard to the man I loved. Shall I ever find strength for such duties and such dangers?

No wonder I feel worn out! The face that looks back at me from the mirror is a very different one to the radiant vision that smiled farewell on the season's worries, ere departing for Thornhill Manor.

What a difference a few days can make in life!

I have never been happy, really happy, in all the previous days of that life. Not even in the brief delirium of my love dream. And now Fate won't allow me to be it, when I might. It is cruelly hard. No wonder I wax rebellious. Wildash is more to me than anything or anyone in the whole wide world and I cannot marry him. I know what women, less scrupulous, would do. I know what many a society woman, with far less excuse than I have, *has* done, and will do again. But I love him, and love that cannot hold a man to his highest and best is not the love that keeps him constant.

So I drag tired limbs and aching heart to bed, and shed such tears as I have never shed before, even when life looked at me with its most hopeless aspect.

CHAPTER XXI

THERE are certain phases of life that serve to demoralise one—mentally. We grow tired of making a stand against troubles, tired of battling against the forces of Fate. We throw down our arms in the face of the jade Misfortune, and bid her do her worst, and we will do the same.

In such a mood as this I woke and reviewed the events of the past two days.

There seemed nothing to hope for, nothing to encourage me in that struggle to 'keep straight' which, in face of many difficulties and temptations, I had hitherto done. I smiled grimly as I thought of my high-bred sisterhood and their escapades; of all the revelations made to and learnt by me in my apprenticeship to Fashion. I pictured Lady Farrington, or Mrs Jackey Beauchamp, in similar plight, with an undesirable husband and a passionate adoring lover, and wondered how they would meet the emergency.

In a mood of cold, hard doggedness I dressed

and had breakfast, and went into the workroom where the usual petty squabbles met and annoyed me. I settled them with a sharpness and temper so unusual that the girls looked astonished. I was far too desperate to care for them or their 'tantrums'—indeed almost desperate enough to break up the whole establishment, and seek 'fresh fields and pastures new' in safe and humble obscurity.

Almost. . . . Not quite, I suppose, for when Wildash walked in, bright, cheery, smiling, all my ill-humour vanished.

'You look pale and worried,' he said. 'I suppose you had no sleep, and from mere vexing that dear little head with the "whys and wherefores" of the present situation. You mustn't do it, sweetheart. We are going to have a "booming season." All else must be sacrificed—temporarily. I'll hit upon some way to get rid of your incubus if you'll only trust me. Anything can be done in this world with the sinews of war. Our business is to get those sinews. Here's the order of campaign. I don't fancy that man will molest you. I'll face him with the terrors of the law. He can't bully *me*. I'll soon let him know that. And you may be sure he'll be in a mortal funk lest he is discovered and

taken back to prison. He must be made to see that you're *not afraid* of anything he can do or say. That is of paramount importance. For the rest you must set about getting a divorce—very quietly. It will be expensive, but we can make money hand over hand now. Of course we'll have to be very careful lest our own little secret leaks out, as that would spoil your case. So I must only be seen here at business hours. We'll have to do our utmost to keep the affair out of the papers, but reporters aren't above a touch of "palm-oil," and I know an awfully good chap—a barrister—who I am sure would help us, and take up the case. Come, aren't the clouds clearing off? Let me see you smile . . . that's better. I can't recognise you as the weeping Niobe of last night. I'm not going to let you be worried—so *there*. You're my property now, and I mean to look after you.'

What could I say? His gaiety was irresistible. My fears vanished before that radiant sunshine as rain clouds before the sun itself. The heavy load of care and anxiety rolled off my shoulders. I smiled back into his eyes and—went boldly forth to meet Mrs Aurelius B. Peck.

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That good lady was infinitely more humble than on the occasion of her first visit. She looked nervously around as if to assure herself that Harry was not lurking about, and suggested my making her a couple of new evening gowns, leaving style and colour and material to my judgment.

These matters settled, I wondered why she still lingered. She seemed to have something on her mind.

At last it came out.

‘My daughter tells me,’ she said, ‘that you were at Lady Persiflage’s; when you were there, may I—would you—I mean, was Mr Wildash there also?—She never said.’

I felt myself colour slightly. ‘Yes . . . he was there,’ I answered. ‘He went down to superintend the theatricals.’

She looked much disturbed. ‘I—I hope—I trust Josephine was careful and—and discreet,’ she stammered. ‘You know, Mrs Costello, people will talk and—she being an heiress and all that—naturally attracts more notice than ordinary young ladies.’

I laughed. ‘Oh! she was most discreet,’ I replied. ‘Infinitely more so than when at Homburg.’

‘Homburg?’ She looked bewildered.

‘Yes . . . those early morning expeditions, biking, or riding. Surely you knew?’

‘Oh! yes—I heard something of it,’ she gasped. ‘Lord sakes! What was the girl thinking of? . . . and the Prince there and all.’

I thought to myself that H. R. H. was not likely to have bestowed much attention on the Pecks, but I did not say so.

‘Is there anything more I can do for you?’ I asked, shutting up my note-book, when I had taken down her instructions. ‘You will excuse my saying my time is very much occupied just now.’

She hesitated . . . looked at me helplessly, and then blurted out her confession.

‘Oh! Mrs Costello, it isn’t as if you weren’t a lady and all that, and though you’re not a mother, as far as I know, still you will understand my feelin’s. I know it’s dreadfully old-fashioned and bad form and all that to have any, but still I *did* so want her to make a grand marriage, and if she gets talked about with your partner, you know, why, it’ll just ruin her chances. And she’s that pig-headed it’s no manner o’ use my speakin’.’

There were tears in her eyes. She sank into a chair, her big body palpitating with agitation.

‘She only laughs at me,’ she went on. ‘Says she’ll have her fling at any cost. I’ve begged her to take Lord Soppington. He’s just mad about her. But she’s no *savoy faire*, as they say.’

‘Still, I don’t see what I can do,’ I interrupted.

‘You could keep Mr Wildash out of her way, couldn’t you?’ she implored.

‘Certainly not. Mr Wildash is no child in leading-strings to be led hither and thither,’ I answered haughtily.

It cost me a pang to think of this rich young American ready to throw herself and her dollars into the arms of the man I loved, and could not marry.

Mrs Peck looked at me helplessly.

‘Then she’ll just go on her own way,’ she lamented. ‘And all my hopes and ambitions count for nothing.’

‘If you have no influence over your daughter, you cannot expect a stranger to possess any.’

‘She’s mighty fond of you, I know,’ lamented the poor woman. ‘Says you’re the *real* lady of the lot. And then, you see, he may be a baronet

some day,' she went on irrelevantly. 'He's such a perfect gentleman too . . . and so good-looking.'

I began to lose patience. 'It may be just possible,' I said, 'that Mr Wildash has no serious thought of your daughter. Certainly, he is no fortune hunter, and his mind is entirely engrossed by this business. His ambitions lie in that line.'

'Oh!' she said doubtfully, 'if I was only quite sure of that! You see her father's one of the richest men in Amurica, and he could buy a title here any day, and we'd both set our hearts on seein' Josephine a duchess.'

'She seemed to hold the same views when I talked with her down at Thornhill Manor,' I said drily.

Mrs Peck brightened visibly.

'You don't say! Wal, that's good news. She can't have changed 'em so quick. Perhaps she only goes on to rile me. But now that I've told you my trouble, Mrs Costello, won't you try and see her by herself, when she comes here. If Mr Wildash kept out of the way for a time she might really take Lord Soppington. It's a splendid chance. The old duke can't live much longer, they say. I'd die happy to see a tiarra on her head, and strawberry

leaves on her carriage panels, and hear 'er called "Your Grace."'

She rose, flushed and eager. I felt sorry for her, and for once forgot her vulgarity and self-importance in the new light of her motherly anxiety.

'If you take my advice,' I said gently, 'you will not urge or worry your daughter on this matter. She has plenty of common sense, and knows the advantages of rank and position as well as you do. Her admiration for Mr Wildash is only a girl's freak. She will soon forget it. . But if *you* appear to make it important, she may eventually believe it is so. You have plenty of time before the season. Take her to country houses where she may meet Lord Soppington. Let her see women, young and as pretty as herself, playing the *rôle* of hostess, invested with married importance. She will form her own conclusions. Such surroundings are more influential than a London ballroom. It might occur to her that to appear at the next Drawing-room the *fiancée* of the future Duke of Messmore, the possessor of the famous Messmore diamonds, is well worth the sacrifice of a fancy. I'm sure it's not more serious—yet.'

'Wal, I'm very grateful to you,' said the poor

woman, squeezing my hands in her huge, tightly-gloved palms. 'Very—and I'll take your advice.'

'Let me know the result?' I said, releasing my aching fingers. 'And if you choose to suggest that Valérie, or Kate Reilly, are infinitely better establishments for her to patronise, I'll not be offended.'

'Now, I call that real magnanimous of you,' she exclaimed. 'All the same, I don't believe she'd go to anyone else for her gowns now. You've hit her style exactly. And her figure don't look the same—it's just elegant! But there, I'm keeping you, I see. I'll be off. You've taken a load off my mind, I do declare. Good-bye again.'

She left, and I stood there absently turning over the last fashion plates, but seeing nothing of the beauties or vagaries Dame Mode had inspired.

There was a curious dull ache in my heart, and with it came a certain feeling of distrust, born of jealousy. It was not unnatural, considering the uncertainty of my position. Besides, I still feared that shadow from my hateful past. It was all very well for Harry to combat it, and pretend there was no need for uneasiness, but he did not know the absolute brutality of the man who was still my husband.

And in his present desperate condition he would not stick at trifles. By what means he had discovered me under my assumed name I could not imagine, but once having done so, I knew I should never feel free from intrusion or demand on his part. He hated me, I knew—hated me all the more because I was prosperous and independent. He would not lightly forego some sort of revenge, and to buy his silence would be a costly proceeding.

Before I reached any further stage of foreboding the door opened to admit Lady Farrington. My first glance at her face showed me she was nervous and agitated. I wondered what had happened. She fidgeted about; turning over stuffs, and gazing absently at trimmings. I had never seen her in so strange a mood before.

I grew tired of suggesting at last. 'I really don't think you want a gown at all,' I said bluntly.

She looked at me, and then closed the fashion book whose leaves she had been turning. 'I don't,' she said. 'I came here because I . . . well, I'd better be frank with you, Mrs Costello . . . I want you to help me, I'm in a—scrape. I don't know what to do, and I've come to ask you to lend me

your room this evening. I want to—see a friend—here. You can guess what I mean. I don't know any other place, or whom to trust. I've reason to suspect I'm watched. I thought of you. . . . I know you're awfully kind-hearted, and I'll pay anything if you'll only do what I want.'

I looked at her in astonishment. 'I would do a great deal for you, Lady Farrington,' I said. 'But I do not wish to be mixed up with any scandal. I suppose it is Captain Calhoun you wish to meet here?'

'What! even *you* know?' she exclaimed.

'It would be somewhat surprising if I did not. You forget how often I have seen you together.'

'I assure you,' she said, 'there's been nothing wrong in the very least. Only my husband has turned nasty, and forbidden me to ask Frank to the house. It's too ridiculous! But, of course, I don't want any scandal. And he's going away—abroad somewhere—and I *must* see him . . . must say good-bye, and I know no one I could trust except *you*. Oh! don't say no. . . . Think, if you cared very much for anyone . . . and might never see him again—'

I thought of Wildash and softened. After all it

couldn't hurt me if she appointed to meet Calhoun here. It would be the last time ; on that I was determined.

'I suppose,' I said, 'you have considered the risk. Certainly, if you think you are watched, it *is* a risk.'

'We shall not arrive, or go away together,' she said. 'I know who is the spy, and I can throw him off the scent. Then you'll do it?'

'I shall be out between five and six this evening,' I said. 'You may call and wait for me—here. If a friend is with you, that is not unusual. Captain Calhoun has called on me once or twice about his sister's trousseau. It will be supposed he is waiting to see me.'

'You are an angel !' she cried eagerly.

I smiled. 'Not a good one, I am afraid.'

CHAPTER XXII

FIVE o'clock found me *tête-à-tête* with Di Abercroft.

I had not seen her since my departure for Thornhill Manor, and I longed to tell her all that had happened. She was free to attend to me and my confidences, and gave strict orders she was not to be disturbed for half an hour.

And how did the theatricals go off? she inquired, handing me tea delicious enough for a duchess's boudoir. Di had the merchandise of many countries at her disposal, so numerous were her friends.

'Capitally, but it is not of them I have come to talk to you,' I said. 'I am in a dreadful dilemma, my dear . . . I don't know what to do.'

And I told her of the night of the burglary, and the horrors of that discovery.

She turned pale. She had long known of that black shadow on my life. She had sympathised with me, and rejoiced at my freedom and advised and helped me to independence.

‘Oh! my poor child!’ she cried. ‘What an awful thing. . . . Whatever will you do?’

‘And that’s not all,’ I continued. ‘I have learnt—I mean Harry Wildash is in love with me.’

‘I expected *that*,’ she said quietly. ‘I knew where you were both drifting. You are equally in love with him?’

‘Yes.’

She put down her cup and looked steadily at me. I felt myself change colour.

‘You are not children—you recognise the danger?’

‘Danger!’ I echoed. ‘I recognise the complications, if that’s what you mean. It is rather—hard—to have gone through all that suffering for nothing.’

‘Yes, and you did suffer. How hard life is on women!’

‘Recognising that fact does not alter, or help it,’ I said bitterly.

‘Tell me what Wildash proposes?’

‘A divorce. . . . He thinks it can be managed quietly and kept out of the papers. I don’t.’

‘No, and it would nearly ruin you.’

‘Of course. People wouldn’t go to a dressmaker who had a convict husband. Besides, he made me

help him in that burglary at Thornhill Manor. Fancy if *that* came out !’

‘Good heavens, child ! How could you have been so foolish !’

‘My life was at stake. And I was terrified out of my wits. I didn’t realise what I was doing.’

‘Are you afraid of his blackmailing you ?’

‘Yes. Though Harry makes light of it. But he doesn’t know the sort of man he is.’

‘There’s another point to consider. In order to get a divorce you must have a clean record. It’s all very well to *be* straight, but you must have seemed so. Now, the fact of taking Wildash into partnership—your constant companionship—even your going down to that country house together, would all tell against you. Then look how many years you have let pass without trying to free yourself.’

‘But, remember, I heard he had been shot trying to escape. It appears he changed clothes with another man. Naturally they looked at the number. I was told Convict 33 was dead. I believed it. There the authorities are to blame—in a manner.’

‘But didn’t you go to the prison . . . verify the report ?’

‘No. I was at Bruges, you know, teaching in that school. I was so thankful to hear of his death, I thought of nothing but my freedom. Then I met Abrahams, and you know he promised to finance this business and you advised it . . . and there I am.’

‘It’s a serious state of affairs, Kate.’

‘My dear Di, what’s the use of telling me what I know? I came to ask for your advice. I am perfectly well aware of my own position.’

‘Don’t get cross, darling. I am just puzzling my brains to think of something, and, upon my word, I think you’d better be passive. Let him make the first move. Then you can form your own plan of action. You see he can’t hurt you without hurting himself.’

‘That is what Harry says.’

‘Well, as you can’t marry Harry, you must either wait for release, or run the risk of divorce-court revelations.’

‘Those hateful courts!’ I muttered. ‘It isn’t as if they contented themselves with the point at issue; they peer and pry into every corner of one’s life, rake up all the past, scandalise you in every possible way, and then hold the Queen’s Proctor

over your head for six months after you get your decree.'

'True, my dear. The law is always on the man's side, in everything. No wonder, considering men made it. Of course there's another way open to you.'

She looked at me keenly, and I read her meaning.

'No,' I said coldly. 'I'm not *that* sort, Di. I should hate him and despise myself.'

'Then, my dear Kate, unless you are very sure of yourself and of him, it is unwise to see too much of each other. You'll never be able to limit yourselves to business hours, and confidences. There'll be a scandal, and if you can't marry him—'

She shrugged her shoulders, and poured out some more tea.

'Di,' I said, 'did you ever love any man?'

'Did I—not? It is that makes me so bitter.'

'Was he bad—to you?'

'He was bad to everyone. He couldn't help it. I left him. But I didn't escape persecution. I tried everything to free myself. . . . I wanted him to divorce me, and he wouldn't.'

'But—at last?'

'Oh! he got his head broken in some drunken

brawl. Was taken to a hospital—and died. There was no doubt about *that*. . . . It was horrible. I had to identify him in the mortuary. Ugh! . . . I have had my fill of horrors, too, Kate.’

‘You never told me this before.’

‘Why should I? Unnecessary confidences only bore one’s friends. I tell you now, because we’ve both suffered at the hands of blackguards. And the suffering has left it’s mark. I . . . I don’t want to appear unsympathetic, Kate, but really, after such an experience of men, I would advise you to follow my own example. Never let a man be of any real importance in your life. Make use of him, but never become his slave. That is what love makes you. I don’t care what a man is, good, bad, or indifferent, but once he knows a woman loves him, he is her tyrant and master. He may show it, or conceal it, but his nature makes him that—a nature that is the legacy of his primeval forefathers. Civilisation glosses it over, it cannot stamp it out. There has always been a struggle for supremacy between the sexes—there always will be. It is inevitable. Study children and you will see the boy tyrannises over the girl. It is emblematic of what the future will be. She has

her brief spell of revenge when passion makes him dumb and foolish, and lays him at her feet, but it is brief. If she yields, her sovereignty is lost. She is only to him the exponent of sex once more. He owes it to himself to lord it over her. And according to the best, or the worst, that is in him, does she feel the whip, or acknowledge the curb. Oh ! Love is a false thing, Kate—a cruel thing—and self-deceptive !’

‘ It looks so beautiful,’ I sighed. ‘ And I am so tired and so lonely, Di, it seems hard to deny myself one little bit of happiness . . . at last.’

‘ I suppose it does. My panacea for sentiment or loneliness is simply—work. Stamp out romance, don’t brood, don’t even *think*, except about your customers and their whims. I find them engrossing enough, I assure you.’

She rose. The half-hour was up. The work-room demanded us both. I thought of Lady Farrington and her lover, and my heart ached with a sort of dull wonder. Why couldn’t women keep themselves free from this curse of peace, this mirage of sentiment ?

I almost hated Wildash at that moment, for again I recognised the tyranny of fate, and held

the knotted strands of complication. Peace of mind, even hope, fled far away.

I kissed Di and bade her farewell, and went home through the wet and gloomy streets as miserable a woman as they held that night.

.
‘Lady and gentleman been waiting for you, madam,’ announced the page, as I opened the door with my latch-key. ‘Lady has left—said she’d call to-morrow. Gent’s upstairs still.’

I wondered. However, I walked into my sitting-room and saw Captain Calhoun. He looked moody and disturbed.

‘How d’ye do, Mrs Costello? I heard you’d be in at six, so I waited because—’

He paused. I looked inquiry, and saw his face flush and a certain embarrassment in his eyes.

‘Because I had something to say to you,’ he went on.

I laughed. ‘It must be very important to occupy your thoughts after the interview that is just over.’

‘Oh—*that!*’ his brow darkened. ‘Well, of course, Cissie never could keep her business to

herself. She's told you I'm going away . . . going to South Africa, next week.'

'Yes,' I said briefly.

'It's rather sudden, and she . . . we, I mean, have been a bit imprudent. At least, her husband chooses to think so. And she gave herself away—rather—when the news came. Poor Cissie! However, it's best as it is. I hope the—the unpleasantness will blow over. So d——d absurd of old Sir John to make a row now. But I've advised her to go down to the country and keep quiet awhile, and play up to the old boy's domestic ideas. There's no use having a scandal for nothing.'

'Nothing—meaning of course a woman's reputation. We'll say nothing about her feelings.'

He looked at me, and bit his long moustache somewhat nervously. 'Feelings? My dear Mrs Costello, you surely don't suppose a woman of the world allows them to stand in the way of . . . of more important things.'

'Not often, I suppose. But when she does, she is more ready to make sacrifices than the man who has placed her in a false position.'

'You surely don't fancy that Lady Farrington—'

‘Has any feelings to sacrifice? That is for you to decide. The world has not been silent, Captain Calhoun. And I have heard a great deal from independent sources that would surprise you, perhaps.’

‘D——d scandalmongers!’ he muttered.

‘That may be. But while people live in society’s glass houses they cannot avoid its stones.’

‘The hard part of it all is,’ he began—then broke off, and commenced to pace to and fro. ‘It will make matters worse if I tell you . . . but there, I’ll get it off my conscience. I’m pretty sure we’ll never meet again, and though you are so heartless and indifferent, still you must have seen that ever since I saw you first . . . that Drawing-room day, you remember? — well, there’s never been any other woman in the world for me. Every feeling worth anything is yours. . . . I’d give my life for you! As regards the . . . the other affair, I just drifted into it as so many men do. You know the world; you know how these things happen. One lets them go on . . . it’s a sort of habit. The woman makes use of you and you go on letting yourself be made use of, until one day—something

brings you to your senses. It was *you* brought me to mine.'

I had seated myself by the fire. I watched him and listened to him with a vague sense of that irony of Fate that of all things in life is the one most sure and hopeless. Cissie Farrington and I—her *modiste* and unconscious rival! Calhoun—and Harry Wildash and Josey Peck! Why, what a topsy-turvy country dance we were all executing at the behest of this whimsical goddess. I could have laughed aloud, but the misery and earnestness of that face before me sobered my sense of mirth, and the irony of the situation.

The masculine mind is an odd thing. It dislikes a display of sentiment, it dislikes being talked about, it dislikes—above all—being laughed at—especially in matters of the affections. Though I had not a particle of sentiment for this man, I yet was conscious that he sincerely meant all he said to me. Vaguely I pitied him, and pitied poor Lady Farrington more. She had indeed sold her woman's heritage for husks. She had loved him unwisely but faithfully, and that love was to him—nothing.

‘Aren’t you ever going to speak?’ he asked at last, wearied, I suppose, of my long silence.

I roused myself then.

‘I don’t know what you expect me to say, Captain Calhoun,’ I answered. ‘But what I do say is that your confession does not flatter me in the least. With the morals and vagaries of society I have nothing in common. I am often glad of it. I think it is hateful the way all honour and decency is set at naught. Why can’t men leave married women to their lawful possessors, instead of entering upon these compromising — friendships? They are bound to have a disastrous end. You are weary of your position, I have no doubt, but even if I cared for you—which happily I don’t—you would only exchange one bondage for another. I am no more free than Lady Farringdon is, though, unlike her, I was not aware of the fact until a short time ago.’

‘You are not a widow?’ he gasped.

‘No. Even if I were, I should not care for such an easy transfer of affections as you propose.’

He grew very pale. ‘That is a cruel speech,’ he said. ‘I know what women think of apparent inconstancy, but it’s not *that* with me. I never

loved Cissie . . . and she knows it. I . . . I've explained that to you.'

'Yes. But the explanation does not speak well for your truth to one or other of us. You must have let her believe you cared. Women—even in these days of easy morality—do not give themselves away for nothing.'

He stood before me, silent, tugging at his long moustache and glancing at my face with uneasiness and apprehension.

'I'm sorry,' I went on presently, 'that you should have told me this. It would have been best unsaid. I can only hope, however, that affections like your own are elastic enough to embrace even a third, or fourth object. You may possibly find consolation in—South Africa.'

I thought I owed him that for the remark I had accidentally heard when he had held that first *tête-à-tête* in my rooms with the woman he had now thrown over.

My price had apparently been compassed by a case of liqueurs. The obligation was repaid.

CHAPTER XXIII

HARRY had left earlier than usual, so when I had dismissed Captain Calhoun I went to my own room, got into a loose tea-gown, and ordered Babette to bring me some black coffee by way of soothing my nerves.

I was irritable and upset, and full of vague alarm. After a period of comparative peace, unpleasant events had followed close upon one another with startling rapidity. The tonic of Di's worldly-wise philosophy had not restored me to common sense half so readily as Captain Calhoun's declaration. It was utterly unexpected, and, in a sense, humiliating, but I felt more sorry for Lady Farringdon than for myself. What she had expected, or gained from that interview I did not know, but the results could scarcely have been gratifying.

I sat there sipping my coffee, gazing moodily into the bright flames—going over old memories; speculating on the events of the future. I have had a harder time of it than most of my sex. For

long I have fought the world single-handed, battling against the treachery of both men and women. It seems hard that just when prosperity holds out more than a promise I should again become the victim of circumstances. Something of old bitterness and hardness returns to me. Even Harry suffers by this mood of mine. I tell myself nothing can come of our love . . . and almost I persuade myself I don't *want* anything to come of it. It is, of course, only a temporary fit of ill-humour, but I grow desperately unhappy, and am not surprised to find the tears rolling down my cheeks.

.
What a long evening! What miserable hours! I had refused dinner at seven o'clock. I am sorry for it now. It is nearly nine and I am very hungry. I wish I had asked Harry to take me out to supper. I might wire, but if he were out he would not get it in time.

I have brooded and thought myself into a headache. I have written my diary up to date, and read a good many of its past records. There seems nothing left to do except go to bed. I almost think I will.

.
A knock and Babette entered.

‘Pardon, madame ; a gentleman to see you. He is below in the salon.’

‘What name ?’ I asked.

‘He do not give me a card. He say it is business of importance connected with the house where madame stayed in the country.’

My heart seemed to stand still. Then every pulse leaped and throbbed into active life. Thornhill Manor . . . the burglary . . . all rushed to my mind. . . . Heavens ! if anything had been discovered. If I . . .

I turned away lest Babette should notice my agitation. ‘*Bien*—say I will be down in a few moments. Stay—give me that tea-gown . . . the black one. That will do.’

I threw it on. A glorified creation of *crêpe de chine* and lace and amber ribbons. I was trembling horribly. I knew I was too unnerved for any critical emergency. But suspense would have been even worse.

I went downstairs and opened the door. There—clothed and in his right mind—stood my evil genius—Jasper Crosse.

I turned faint and sick. Then, as suddenly as it had fled, my courage returned—the courage of desperation.

I shut the door, and came forward.

‘Why are you here?’ I asked calmly.

The mocking devil of his old effrontery was in his eyes as they met mine.

‘An unusual question for a wife to put to a husband from whom she has been separated so many years,’ he answered. ‘I am here to see you, of course, my dear Kate, and to discuss with you certain little matters that bear upon the present situation.’

I threw myself into a chair. All that was hard and defiant and desperate in my nature sprang to arms at his tone and manner. I felt a hatred and horror of him that were well-nigh murderous.

‘What matters?’ I asked brusquely.

He glanced round. ‘They cannot be discussed in a moment, and talking is somewhat dry work. May I suggest your requesting that amiable French domestic of yours to bring me some — well — champagne, let us say. You are evidently in clover here, and I have no doubt your taste in brands of wine and liqueur is as good as it used to be.’

‘You have forced your presence on me,’ I said ‘with the plea of business. State that business and go. This is my house ; you have no right here any longer. Understand that, once for all, before I summon the law to help me !’

‘So *that* is the position you mean to take. Very well. So much the worse for you.’

He too drew up a chair ; seated himself with his arms on the back, and fixed his evil, threatening eyes upon me.

For one moment my heart sank. I wished that Wildash was here — that I had anyone to help me. But despair lent me strength and I waited to hear the form his threat would take.

‘You think yourself unassailable, I suppose,’ he sneered. ‘Living here, keeping up an establishment of this sort, where your fine customers pay for the use of your rooms to meet their lovers. . . . Oh ! yes. A very immaculate piece of virtue *you* are ! You and your d——d Irish partner !’

I sprang to my feet ; crimson, and shaking with rage and indignation.

‘How *dare* you say such things—how dare you !’

‘Oh ! I’ll dare say a good deal worse than that, and do it too, my pretty vixen. There’s many an

old score between us, and, by Jove! I'll wipe one off to-night at all events. Don't think you can defy me, or I'll knock you and your pretended business to the four winds! A word to the police, another to some of the deluded husbands of your fine customers, and where are you, I'd like to know? Besides, there's that little affair at Thornhill. It would look rather queer that the moment you got yourself invited down to a respectable house, a burglary should take place, eh? And if you defend yourself you only prove that you were the accomplice of your husband!'

'What do you want? . . . What do you mean by these threats?' I cried passionately. 'In any case if you ruin me you ruin yourself. You'll be taken back to prison. . . . What have you to gain?'

'Do you think I haven't weighed all that, my lady? . . . There are times in life when vengeance looks sweeter than anything else! I've had five years of hell. I got out of it hating every living creature, but hating you the most. For it's to you I owed that arrest. Oh! you may deny it as you please, but Pierre Justin rounded on you after that affair in Brussels, and I know how you tricked me!'

‘That brute!’ I scoffed contemptuously. ‘A drunken sot who would sell his soul for a glass of “*petit bleu*.” And you believed him?’

‘It suited me to believe him. I knew you hated me, and it was a good way to get rid of me. But it’s my turn now. You’ll either pay me ten thousand pounds to keep silence, or I’ll expose you and your business for what it is, and let your bully of an Irishman make the best of it—there!’

How he could know of Wildash . . . and how he could have patched up such a history of suspicion and probability amazed me. I knew his mind was too vile to harbour a single innocent thought of man or woman, but I had not supposed that constructions so monstrous could have been placed on my actions. I remembered Lady Farringdon’s words. That she was suspected—watched. Had these facts come to his ears? If not, how could he, on mere supposition, have concocted such a horrible plot.

I rose from my chair. ‘What you ask is both preposterous and impossible,’ I said coldly. ‘I couldn’t pay a quarter of such a sum, if my life depended on it. If you don’t believe me I can show you my bank-book.’

He laughed harshly. 'I never supposed you had as much lying to your credit,' he answered. 'But you can easily get it.'

He drew out a paper and glanced rapidly over its contents. 'You have rich customers and plenty of them. You can—borrow—shall we say? . . . What about Captain Calhoun, the amiable friend of Lady Farrington? what of the duke of Bridgewater? what of Lord Soppington? . . . What of various husbands whose wives you have obliged? . . . Oh! this is no time for pretences, my lady, and if I'm to swing, by heaven you'll have a taste of the humiliation. You shelved me and changed your name. You set up here on the strength of borrowed money (I don't ask what else—besides interest—you paid to Abrahams). You've appeared discretion itself, but all the time you've lived a double life, and the world shall know it!'

'Very well,' I said doggedly. 'Let the world know it. Do your worst. I'm beyond caring for that now. I know you, and I know I have nothing but persecution and misery to expect at your hands while you live. But not one farthing do I give to help that life, or keep you from the

fate you've challenged. If you are desperate, so am I. The memory of those awful days spent with you is enough to crush out any pity, or any feeling for you. I repeat—I defy you. You can do your worst.'

My hand was on the bell. He sprang forward and clutched my arm.

'Think again,' he said. 'Think before you drive me out once more. You may have peace, freedom, love, all for that sum I ask you. I'll sign anything, swear anything. I'm going away, out of this cursed country. You'll never see me again. . . . You need have no fear of *that*. Leave that bell alone! If you ring, I swear it it will be your death-warrant.'

He held my arms in a grip so strong and fierce that I was powerless to move. Face to face, eye to eye, so we stood for one moment of defiance and of dread.

'Will you do what I ask?' he demanded.

My brain felt dizzy. The room seemed to swim before me. I closed my eyes, and sudden darkness enveloped me.

Then, through the mist of reeling senses, I caught a sound—the sound of a footstep, quick

firm, alert. The door swung open. Before I could cry or move, I saw a figure spring forward. My arms were released. Two strong hands were at the bully's throat, and he was shaken to and fro as a terrier shakes a rat.

'You cur! Frightening a woman out of her senses! . . . Kate, there's a policeman outside. Open the window and call him. This blackguard sha'n't escape.'

I rushed forward. As I reached the window a hoarse shout stayed me.

'Wait,' it said. 'Remember Thornhill.'

CHAPTER XXIV

I STOPPED. My hand was on the window. I could hear the traffic below—the roll of carriages, the tramp of feet.

Involuntarily I looked at Wildash. His hands were still on that brute's throat, but he turned and met my glance.

'Give the alarm — call the police,' muttered Jasper, hoarsely, 'and I tell the story of how you let me in to Thornhill Manor, and got me out.'

'You brute, you thief! Who do you think would believe you?' shouted Wildash, furiously.

'A good many people when they know she's my wife,' he answered.

'He is right,' I said doggedly. 'It's no use, Harry. I'm at his mercy. He came to blackmail me, as I expected. I can't and won't pay for his silence. Let him go. . . . Let him do his worst. I don't care.'

I dropped into a chair, weak and unnerved by that terrible scene. The tears rushed to my eyes, and shut out the fierce faces of the two men. I

seemed to know that Wildash had relaxed his grip. I could hear the laboured breathing of Jasper Crosse. In that one moment, the whole of my life flashed before me. . . . All I had done, and suffered, and repented of. I felt as if I faced death, for all hope of anything good or helpful had vanished before this man's hateful presence.

Then again I heard Wildash speaking. 'What will you take,' he said, 'to hold your tongue? To let the law free her, and get out of the country?'

'Ah! now you're talking sense,' sneered Jasper. 'That's what I came about to-night. I told her straight that I'd do all this, swear, promise anything for ten thousand pounds.'

'And I refused to give a penny!' I exclaimed. 'Harry, don't listen to him. He cannot be trusted. To answer his demands now is only to lay myself open to them again and again. I will not do it.'

Harry released the ruffian, and stood facing him with wrathful eyes.

'Now listen,' he said. 'I'll give you a last chance—one only. I hardly suppose you're anxious to go back to convict life, and it would be a poor satisfaction to put your own head in a noose for sake of revenging yourself on your wife. I offer

you five thousand pounds—money down—and that's all you'll ever get from her, or me. For this sum you are to offer no opposition to the divorce for which she will apply. You will sign a paper to that effect as well as a promise that you make no further claim on her.'

'D——d if I'll do anything of the sort for such a paltry sum,' answered the bully, doggedly. 'Ten thou—not a penny less, or I'll smash up her business and her reputation. You'll suffer, too, my fine fellow. I'm not alone in the boat *this* time.'

Wildash gave a short, hard laugh. Then he took out a cigarette from his case, lit it deliberately, walked over to the door and threw it open.

'Go !' he said.

Jasper's face turned ashy grey. His sullen eyes turned from one to the other of us.

'You defy me—then ?'

'I do . . . go, do your worst. You walk from this house back to your prison. I followed you here to-night. I have a police officer waiting below. I told him I had reason to suspect a man was on the premises for some unlawful purpose. . . . The moment I blow this whistle he will come upstairs. I shall inform him who you are. I—'

My eyes had been on Jasper. Suddenly I saw his hand go to his breast pocket. I sprang to my feet. A loud report drowned my scream of warning, and Harry fell across the doorway, his white shirt dyed red with a gush of blood.

Over his prostrate body Jasper Crosse leaped to freedom. As I threw myself beside Harry he thrust the signal whistle into my hand. 'Blow it for God's sake!' he whispered.

I obeyed. A shrill summons sounded. . . . I heard voices, oaths, hurried footsteps. Then silence and darkness overwhelmed me. . . . I knew no more.

.
When I recovered my senses I was lying on my own bed, and Babette was bathing my forehead, and murmuring expressions of pity and wonder and horror.

For a moment or two I could remember nothing. My thoughts were confused, my brain dazed and stunned. Then gradually the horrors of that scene came back to me. I sprang up in bed . . . a low cry escaped my lips.

'Is he—is he dead?' I gasped.

'No, madame. *Restez tranquille.* It is *affreux*

—terrible. But not as madame fears. The *vilain* murderer they have arrested. *Le pauvre monsieur* he is removed to the hospital of Charing Cross . . . to have mended his wound. . . . And madame, she has the fright, the shock. She must be kept quiet. I have sent for the doctor. He come—*vite*. It will be soon all well. Madame must rest and not so agitate herself.'

I sank back on the pillows. The worst had come then. There was no need to dread it any longer. And now that it was irrevocable, that the blow had fallen, a sort of sullen resignation that was almost relief came over me.

The matter was beyond my interference or control. Jasper had been arrested. He would be taken back to prison. He would be tried for this murderous assault. My story would come out, and . . . Well, I should be ruined financially and socially, I supposed.

Somehow that did not seem to trouble me now. In a great crisis all lesser troubles sink into insignificance. I closed my eyes, and Babette's chatter rippled on like an endless brook. I could only think of Harry. For my sake he was suffering . . . his life was in peril. For my sake he would have

to face odium and comment should our story get to the public ear. The business that looked so promising after all only depended on that frail bark—'Vanity.' On the freaks and fancies of women who might profess themselves scandalised at forthcoming revelations.

It was of Harry I thought now, and all that was in me of womanly tenderness, pity and passion went out to him in that hour.

If that wound proved fatal . . . if he died . . . I felt that for me life would be also ended.

I heard the clock strike midnight. Only twelve o'clock and I had lived a tragedy—had looked upon despair, and almost death. So few hours and so much had happened.

I felt I must nerve myself for the coming day. The newspapers would have the story. . . . People would be coming to me full of curiosity. I should have to give evidence.

I hid my face, praying vaguely for some sort of strength to meet these approaching horrors. I shuddered at the thought of the long hours before me. I prayed Babette to stay. I resolved to ask the doctor for a sleeping-draught when he came.

It was a dull, foggy morning when I awoke. Babette had lit the fire, and brought me coffee and rolls and my morning letters. I asked her for the papers. She looked at me entreatingly.

‘Mais—Madame—’

‘Get them at once,’ I said sharply.

My head still felt dazed and bewildered. I turned over the letters hurriedly. There was nothing from the hospital. Babette returned with the papers. I scanned the columns with eager eyes. Yes—there it was!

‘Strange Affair in Bond Street.’

The usual penny-a-liner’s comments on very scanty facts. Another paper headed it ‘Supposed Burglary.’ Yet another gave out, ‘Attempted Murder of the manager of a Fashionable Emporium.’ The affair would be town talk by now.

‘I must get up,’ I said to Babette. ‘But I cannot see anyone in the showroom. The appointments I will wire about. Anyone else must be told I am ill. And here . . . let Wrothesay go off to the hospital at once for news of Mr Wildash. He is not to come back without some account of how he is.’

I threw on a dressing-gown and wrote the necessary telegrams and notes. I felt wretchedly

ill and unnerved still. As soon as the last letter was finished I lay down on the couch before the fire.

Soon enough I knew my troubles would begin. I should have reporters coming. My depositions would be required. I must engage a solicitor. There would be no more peace or rest for me till the whole wretched business had been concluded—and then— Well, something seemed to tell me I should have rest enough at last.

.
'Kate . . . won't you see me? Babette refused, but I felt sure you'd let me in.'

It was Di Abercroft's voice. I had forgotten her. Forgotten too what a shock the news in those morning papers would be.

I crossed to the door and admitted her. Her face was pale and anxious, her eyes full of concern.

'Oh! my dear,' she cried. 'Is it true? . . . how horrible! Do tell me what really happened?'

I told her as briefly as possible of that scene and its results.

Her horror almost equalled my own. 'At the worst I never imagined anything so dreadful . . . it's worse than you suspected. And poor Harry! How is he? The wound wasn't fatal, thank God!'

‘I’ve not heard yet,’ I answered.

There was a moment of dead silence. Then suddenly I began to tremble and broke into helpless sobbing. She did her best to soothe me, but I had lost all self-control.

.
She stayed with me all that day, even interviewing callers and seeing reporters. The doctor had ordered me perfect quiet. I was suffering from shock — temporary derangement of the nervous system. On no account was I to be disturbed.

I spent that whole day on the sofa, racked by suspense and anxiety. My head throbbed as if it would burst. Even tears brought no relief. Di’s presence was a comfort for which I was dumbly grateful. I was too worn out for speech.

Towards evening the pain grew less violent. I had heard twice from the hospital. Harry was seriously injured, but they were hopeful. The bullet had pierced the shoulder blade. It was to be extracted the following day if his strength allowed of it.

Shortly after the second message a letter reached me marked *Immediate*.

I opened it and saw it was from Mrs Peck.

‘My dear Mrs Costello,’ she wrote. ‘*How* terrible for you, and only fancy, my daughter Josephine insisted on going to the hospital herself. . . . And she would see Mr Wildash, and oh! the scandal of it. . . . I’m nearly distracted. She vows she’ll visit him there every day, and her poppa and I can’t help it. She’s just demented. What am I to do? The whole town is ringing with the affair. I met quite a number of your customers at the New Gallery, and they could talk of nothing else. . . . May I see you to-morrow? It will be the death of me if Josey goes on as she is doing.’

I laughed bitterly. Then I handed the letter to Di. She read it slowly

‘More complications, I see. Well, dear, it’s not your fault if the girl chooses to get herself talked about. Besides, it will only be considered American eccentricity. Her dollars would cover any caprice.’

‘I think,’ I said slowly, ‘it would be better for him if he responded to this devotion. It isn’t as if he was a nobody. He is by far her superior in birth, and he may come into that title, and her money will do wonders for the estate. As for the parents’ objection—Josey is not likely to mind *them*.’

She looked at me, astonished. 'What *are* you saying, Kate? I thought you were madly in love with him—only yesterday.'

'Many things have happened since yesterday,' I said. 'Yesterday my affairs were not a public scandal. . . . Yesterday people could not say I was the wife of a forger, a thief, and almost a murderer. Scandals are burrs that cling to a woman's skirts too closely for detachment. In a week's time my skirts will be weighted with burrs. The man who tries to rid me of them will only prick his own fingers and attach them to himself. I have looked happiness in the face only to know it is not for me. I shall never drag anyone I love into this network of infamy and disgrace.'

'You would have the courage to send him from you, after he has risked his life on your behalf?'

'Better to send him while I have the courage, . . . while another is at hand to soothe his wounded vanity, than see him repent all his life long.'

'Why should he? . . . What makes you think so?'

'There is too much likelihood of it. I could not risk shipwreck a second time.'

'I fancy you misjudge Harry. He has faults, but not vices. And I am sure he loves you.'

‘He will love me all the more if he never wins me,’ I said bitterly. ‘That is what a man always does. And Josey Peck will be a better wife to him than ever I could be. She has not outlived all softness and sentiment and romance. She has no past of horrors on which to look back.’

‘Your past is not half as bad as some I could mention,’ she said. ‘At least, you have not been the sinner.’

‘Appearances are against me. There is so much that can be said . . . that I could not combat, or deny.’

‘You seem determined to make the worst of things to-night.’

‘There is no “best” to make of them. I seem to have come to the end of everything—even of caring for what was dearest to me.’

‘You are wearied and overwrought, Kate. Things will get better, believe me. The clouds will clear. Your spirits will rebound. You will not be so willing to throw away happiness then. It doesn’t come to us so often that we can afford to play with it.’

‘There is no question,’ I said, ‘of playing with it. I seem to have been asleep and suddenly

awakened. I wondered how I could have been so foolish as to believe I was safe, or going to be happy. I might have known something would happen. That has always been my fate. . . . You see I began badly. I had all a girl's delusions, and more than an ordinary girl's ignorance. I thought men were all strong and earnest of purpose, and brave and tender. That they would not hurt a woman. . . . And oh! Di, I have been hurt again and again—so cruelly.'

'I know. We all learn the possibility of such hurts.'

'Yes, but with some it is only possible, not real. When I thought I was free, it was different. I let myself go. He had that way. . . . You know what I mean, Di—persuasive, caressing, dominating. And we were such good friends. Well, I've had one happy year—that is something.'

'One,' she said. 'Poor child! And life not half lived.'

'I have lived as much of it as I care for, or desire. I seem to have reached a stage of indifference. This—has killed hope and ambition. Everything is changed since last night. I couldn't begin again. I couldn't endure the curiosity of

those foolish women. They will all learn my history, and add to and improve upon it. Not that *that* matters very much. They would still come to me if they thought I made better than anyone else. But I don't, Di. And without Harry to back me up all the energy would flag.'

'But, dear, it seems to me that you yourself are putting Harry away.'

'Because if I do not, I know a time will come when he will want to put himself away. That would . . . would hurt me, Di. Against my better judgment I gave in before. Look at what I have brought upon his head.'

She was silent.

'I have lived a lifetime since last night,' I went on. 'I have been blind and deaf long enough. I can never be it again. Distrust is born in me afresh—I will curse no other life with the misery of my own.'

I sank back on the cushions. Stone could not have been colder nor iron harder than my heart had grown to all emotions and sentiments.

My eyes fell on the loose, slovenly writing of Mrs Peck. I took up the letter and read it slowly through.

'It must answer itself,' I said. 'I will do nothing.'

CHAPTER XXV

DI has left me at last.

Left me to my new mood of hardness. To the fixed despair that has fastened upon my soul.

‘Vanity of vanities!’ I say to myself. ‘All is vanity.’

And life looks but vanity and folly to me now in this black hour. I know what lies before me. I know what I have to face. I am aware that the Bond Street scandal will be a sweet morsel for the garbage-pickers of all ranks and grades. I can almost *see* what the notice boards will display. I can almost read the history as the evening papers will give it. The history of the fashionable dress-maker with a convict husband. The escape of the husband and his discovery of her luxurious surroundings. The entrance of the lover . . . the quarrel; rage—jealousy—and revenge! Oh! it will be fine reading for the public, and what can I do or say to explain away a false position. To-

tomorrow the inquiry begins. They have taken Wildash's deposition. I have to appear as witness . . . witness against the man who still calls me wife !

Nothing can help me—nothing can avert the scandal. It is a stone that will gather moss as it rolls, it will reveal all that I have strenuously endeavoured to conceal. I may as well throw up the sponge, and be done with pretence.

The world will know me, not as I am, but as my life's enemy chooses to say that I am. Vile as he is, his vileness will only throw a darker shadow on myself. To have been one with him speaks eternal condemnation. I see that now—but it is too late to alter anything.

Fate must do its worst.

.
Wide awake I lie. . . . I cannot sleep. I ask myself whether it would not be better to end suspense and life together. It could be done—so easily. An overdose of chloral . . . the friend who has helped me in many a troubled hour and sleepless night ; and then no more waking to misery, no more trouble, no more tears. And Harry—he too would be free. Free to make Josey happy.

To raise her to his ancestral honours, perhaps . . . to live rich, prosperous, well content in his own country and among his own kin.

I have been only a shadow on his life. He will soon forget me.

The idea takes overmastering possession of my mind. I rise from bed, and go to the little medicine cupboard above my washstand. There is the bottle. I hold it in my hand a moment, trying to realise the mysterious power that is contained in this tiny phial. Strangely enough, as I so stand and look at it, there rushes back to me the memory of that morbid-minded boy whose tragic end had blighted my summer holiday.

I almost seem to see him. His pallid face, his strange eyes, his languid smile. I close my own eyes and give myself up to the spell of imagination and memory. The sea stretches before me. Again the golden moonlight shines upon its rippling surface. . . . Again the monotonous splash of the waves sounds in my ear.

Suddenly—something—an icy breath, a chill of terror overpowers my senses.

A whisper, faint as a sigh, steals to my ear. One word only—‘*Don’t*—’

That is all. But my eyes sharply unclosed, and with a shudder I start, and step back from the seeming presence of an outstretched hand.

The bottle falls at my feet and is shattered to a thousand fragments.

I stoop over them in sudden dismay . . . at the same moment I hear at the front door the sharp rat-tat of a telegraph messenger. Before Babette knocks I seem to have grown calm and like myself once more. I know I have had a warning . . . I feel convinced but for it I should have swallowed that poison. Now—it is beyond my power to do so.

I take the yellow missive with indifference. A few moments ago I had so nearly done with life that I scarcely realise its importance again. The lamp is growing dim. I take the paper close to it. I read . . . What?

‘Jasper Crosse committed suicide by hanging himself in his cell at eight o’clock to-night.’

I fell into the chair with an hysterical cry. I did not even know Babette was there.

How does the brain work in moments such as

these? What words can describe the passage of feeling from despair to relief. From death to life? . . .

I lived in memory those lines of Adelaide Proctor's:—

‘In that one moment’s anguish
Your thousand years have passed.’

It seemed indeed a thousand years. A double lifetime. But one cannot speak of such a moment. One *dare* not. . . .

Oh! thank God! Thank God! I am free . . .
I am safe.

.

It is a month since I wrote those words.

A month.

Has the world gone on and have I—alone—stood still, with a blank record of days and weeks around me?

I ask myself this as I lie in the dreamy peace of convalescence among my heaped-up pillows, beside my bright wood fire.

I have been very ill, they say. Well, that was to be expected. A woman could not undergo such terrible mental and physical strain as I had undergone in this past year without a breakdown of some

sort. Mine came after that moment of relief which was the last record in my diary.

I was free. Jasper Crosse had ended his evil life in a moment of blind rage against the Fate he had defied. I know no particulars. I asked for none, nor do I intend to do so.

It is sufficient to know he will not trouble me again.

Free ! How sweet the word is . . . how full my heart seems of gratitude and peace. I close my eyes. When I open them again the nurse is standing by me with a pile of letters and papers that have accumulated during my illness.

‘You are well enough to read them now,’ she says. ‘I am going out for an hour. Babette will be within call.’

I watch her grey skirt and grey veil out of the door. Then I glance at the pile on the little table by my couch. I turn them over.

One is from Di Abercroft. I open that first. It is dated only yesterday.

‘My dear,’ it says. ‘I hear you are rapidly mending. You will soon be all right. I write to tell you that the business went on the same as ever. I looked after it. And the little duchess’s order was

duly executed. She was married last week. A few new people dropped in—I saw them for you. The scandal was soon hushed up and they got no word of it from *me*. Mrs Jackey Beauchamp, *the* Mrs Jackey Beauchamp, who is a power in the social world, has given you an order. I am not sure about the money, but she is quite *the* sort of person to make you, and as she took a fancy to one of the models, I executed a variation on it which pleased her fastidious taste immensely. Indeed, it was a stroke of genius for which you ought to be grateful.

‘Tender inquiries from poor Wildash. He has had a harder fight for it than was supposed. I saw him last week. He is to leave the hospital to-day. The bullet went dangerously near his right lung. He is a perfect shadow of what he was. The devotion of the little Peck girl has been the talk of society, and the despair of “Poppa and Momma Peck.” You see dollars carry weight even with hospital authorities. I believe she visited him every day. He will call on you as soon as you are allowed to see anyone. He couldn’t write. He wasn’t allowed to use his arm.

‘The business is to go on, so he says—and it really looks most flourishing in spite of the absence

of the "two heads." Luckily this is a slack time. If it had been the season I don't know what you'd have done. That little "Jacks" is a treasure. I'd raise her salary if I were you. She's worth it. She managed the whole workroom. I think I've told you all that is necessary. I'll call round as soon as I'm told you can see me. Cheer up, little woman. Your long lane has reached its turning, I think.—Ever yours, DI.'

My eyes filled with grateful tears as I read those lines. She had, indeed, been a friend to me. I felt I could never repay her sufficiently. It is one woman in a thousand who *proves* her friendship. The other nine hundred and ninety-nine are content with professing it.

So after all Vanity was holding its own. The Court of Fashion would not close its doors on anything that ministered successfully to its necessities.

The ball was set a-rolling once more. The puppets were ready to dance. I had but to rise and take my place as of old, and pull the strings, and set them going to the tune they loved best. The tune was Novelty, the instrument La Mode. Let wars come, and lives be sacrificed, let hearts

ache or break, or reputations die, let come what may of good or ill, of misery or happiness, women must dress, and Fashion will hold her own as their idol while the world is a power and ruled by the caprice of the Eternal Feminine!

.
The rest of my correspondence was comparatively unimportant. Bills, orders, circulars from large firms. All the mass of rubbish that accumulates as tribute to unnecessary postal deliveries.

A few cheques gladdened my eyes, and my credit seemed fairly established with certain business houses who asked a renewal of custom on liberal terms.

Fortune was evidently bent on showing me the smile of favour at last. Soothed and tranquilised, I lay back among my cushions, and took counsel with myself as to the future.

That future concerned itself especially now with the continuation of my partnership with Harry Wildash.

I thought of it from a new standpoint, a less selfish one than formerly. In order to bring all particulars of the matter clearly to my mind I took out my diary and read the record of those

past months. I studied Wildash in the light they showed him. I weighed that fascinating personality of his against my own powers of resistance. I asked myself whether his declaration of love had sprung from anything stronger than pity, sympathy, comradeship?

It seemed to me as I read those entries that a marriage with me would have very disastrous results for his future. I had been caught up in a whirlwind of emotion, and amidst the complex elements of jealousy, and fear, and passion, and desire I had lost sight of what was best for him. I had thought only of the joy of winning what was dear to myself.

Subsequent events had brought me face to face with horrors that had made life real, and the situation perilous.

That restless, feverish time had passed. I felt aged by years and terrors. I looked back on a stage of feeling on which the curtain had dropped. To raise it was only to look on disorder and desolation. Chaos lay behind. My tragedy had had a long final act. It was over.

How clearly I seemed to see things now. How different they looked! But I saw his face, and

heard his voice as he said, '*I am too fond of you to let your life lie at the mercy of such a brute.*'

Fond. But did that mean love? The pre-eminent, all-powerful passion for which alone sacrifice is necessary and unheeded. Was it not only that he had grown used to me? We had been good friends—comrades. In a moment of weakness I had shown him too plainly that I cared for him. The result was that brief confession which had hurried us into a drama of consequences as horrible as it was brief.

Now—everything was altered.

'It must never be,' I told myself. 'He would soon regret . . . it stands to reason he *must* regret.'

I closed the book and put it away. Perhaps I put away with it something sadder than forfeited hope—for I knew I had looked my last on all that makes a woman's life endurable. The gates of Paradise only open once for mortal eyes. . . . They closed for me ere I had even seen what lay beyond.

CHAPTER XXVI

I WOKE from a long sleep. The room was dusk. I saw the grey figure of the nurse dozing in her chair by the fire. The clock on the chimney-piece was softly chiming five.

I stirred and sat up.

‘Wasn’t that a knock at the door?’ I asked.

She moved across the room and opened it. I heard a whispered colloquy. My ears were sharp. I recognised the faint nasal twang of Josey Peck’s voice.

‘Come in,’ I said loudly. ‘That’s Miss Peck, I’m sure. I should like to see her.’

She entered—a quiet, subdued figure, dressed all in faint grey and silver fox furs. The perfume of a huge bunch of violets which she carried filled the room delightfully. She knelt by the couch and took my hands.

‘You poor dear,’ she said. ‘I am so glad you’re

better. I've called here heaps of times, but they said no one was allowed to see you.'

'That was good of you,' I said gratefully. 'I suppose I have been very ill. One never knows—oneself. It's all hazy and like a bad dream . . . only weakness left.'

The nurse touched the electric button, and a rosy light shed itself over the dusk of the room.

I thought how lovely the girl looked with her cheeks flushed by the cool air, and her eyes no longer sparkling and alert but full of a new and tender earnestness. Was it in this guise she had played ministering angel to Wildash? If so—

I drew myself away, conscious of a pang of jealousy.

'Won't you sit down?' I said. 'Nurse will get us some tea.'

She rose and sank into the low chair the nurse wheeled up to her. She had laid the violets on my lap.

'I brought them for you,' she said gently.

Her face was full of grave concern.

'Are you looking at my grey hairs?' I said, touching the loose locks on my temples. 'You see what illness does for one.'

‘Ah! it wasn’t only illness. . . . That shock . . . that grief. Oh! I know. I heard about it from—’

‘Heard—what?’ I asked.

‘The papers had it, you know, and everyone was talking, and saying how brave you were, and how beautifully you had borne your troubles. . . . Seems he tried to kill you—Mr Wildash told me.’

She spoke with little of the old Americanisms. The change in her was as surprising in a way as the change my glass had shown me in myself.

The door closed. The nurse had left to get tea. I took my courage in both hands with a desperate effort.

‘I too have heard of you,’ I said. ‘Of how kind and devoted you have been to Mr Wildash. How you have lightened those hours of suffering and weariness. How you turned a deaf ear to gossip, or possible consequence.’

She flushed rosily.

‘I just could not help it,’ she said simply. ‘I was so sorry for him, and you couldn’t do anything. Seemed as if there was no one else—but me.’

‘He must be very grateful to you?’

‘He don’t say much—ever,’ she said, somewhat consciously. ‘Quite altered he is at times. All

the fun and life gone out of him. I assure you, Mrs Costello, often and often I've gone home and had a good cry after I'd left him. The change hurt me so.'

'Some changes,' I said, 'are the result of feeling, as much as of circumstances. Devotion such as yours cannot have failed to touch him. If he returned it—'

'That's just it,' she interposed. 'That's what troubles me. He seems as if he longed to speak—and something held him back.'

A pang shot through my heart. Those words echoed through its empty chambers, haunted now by ghosts of all that might have been.

Something held him back.

That something was myself . . . his promise. I had not been wrong in my surmise. He had not loved me. 'I am too fond of you' had meant what I feared it meant. No more—no less.

'Josey,' I said quietly, 'do you really care for Harry Wildash?'

'Care! . . . I just worship him,' she cried. 'I don't mind what he is, rich or poor, commoner or titled. I know I'd just be content to lie down at his feet and let him wipe his boots on me if it

pleased him—so only I had him always beside me.'

Forcible language this. It gave her away without effort or pretence.

I drew a deep breath and nerved my voice to steadiness. 'And if,' I said, 'he should care equally for you—'

'Oh! but he doesn't, I'm sure of that. I'm nothing to him but a crazy Amurrcan girl, good for jokes and fun and all that. I don't believe he ever dreams how dearly I love him.'

Her pretty face had grown pale. She was something more than than a 'crazy Amurrcan girl' in the passion and strength of the lesson that Love was teaching her.

'Of course I know I'm not a lady—like you,' she went on. 'Poppa was nothing, and he married momma when she was only a factory girl out Dacotah way. And people just laugh at them and make use of their money, and they won't see it. But I'm not going to sell myself for a title . . . and I've told 'em so—straight. If I can't have the man I care for, well—I'll take no one else.'

Her eyes filled with tears. The firelight glistened on them as they rolled down on the

silvery furs that lay loose about her throat. It was a pretty picture, and the reality of her grief lent a touch of irony to its mere prettiness.

‘I think you are right,’ I said. ‘Love is worth all the riches and titles in the world. You will be none the worse for having learnt that, even if—’

‘If it is only on one side?’ she asked. ‘There is some good in it, isn’t there? It’s not the false thing people pretend—smart people, I mean?’

‘No—not always.’

‘I have been very unhappy,’ she went on. ‘And it’s not natural to me to be *that*. You see life’s always been made just as nice as ever it could be. I’ve had everything I wanted, and when I came over to Eu-rope, and had strings and strings of men following me and flattering and wanting to marry me, I thought I was only having a rattlin’ good time. I never supposed that the only one man for whom I cared a straw would be so hard to win over.’

‘I think you will win him—in the end,’ I said cheerfully. ‘But you must have patience. Now here is the tea. You shall pour it out for me. This is the first day I’ve been allowed to sit up.’

‘Oh!’ . . . she cried, with quick regret. ‘Why didn’t you say so? I’ve been tiring you chattering about my own foolish troubles, and quite forgetting you’re so weak.’

‘I am strong enough to hear a great deal more of your chatter,’ I said, smiling. ‘You are like a breeze from the outer world. I seem to have been shut away from it for years!’

‘What a bad time you’ve been having,’ she said, as she poured out the tea. ‘No wonder you’re so changed.’

‘You find me very much changed?’ I asked.

‘Well,’ she said frankly, ‘it stands to reason I do. I’ve always seen you beautifully dressed, bright, smiling, happy-looking. Now — you’ve lost all your colour, and are as thin as a shadow, and your lovely hair is all silvery in front. Not but what I think you’re lovely anyway. And when you’re well, I s’pose there won’t be any sort of difference, but just at first—’

‘It was a bit of a shock?’ I questioned.

She laughed. ‘Not that so much as a surprise.’

‘I suppose,’ I said tranquilly, ‘it would be a surprise to anyone who had last seen me as

you describe, beautifully dressed, bright, smiling, happy?’

‘I guess it would, until they got used to it.’

‘How old are you, Josey?’ I asked.

‘Nineteen next month.’

‘And I shall be thirty. Does that sound very old?’

‘Well, we reckon it old for a woman in Amurrca, but we don’t wear as well as your people here. Guess it’s our hot rooms and iced drinks and candies that spoil our complexions and teeth.’

I was listening vaguely. My thoughts had drifted to something else—a scheme, a plan to satisfy my own doubts and further her interests.

She finished her tea, and then went over to the glass and adjusted her hat and furs.

‘It’s done me real good this talk with you,’ she said. ‘When may I come again?’

‘Come to-morrow,’ I answered, ‘at the same time.’

‘You’re just real sweet to me. May I . . . would you mind if I—kissed you?’

The touch of those fresh young lips on my pale cheeks, the sight of the fresh young face

so strangely winning in its earnestness, these remained with me for long after she had gone. For long after I had sent a message to Harry, and received its answer.

I begged him to come round this evening at eight o'clock.

He merely wrote—'Yes.'

CHAPTER XXVII

My reply to the nurse's remonstrance was brief but effective. 'If it kills me I must see the friend who is coming to-night.'

She gave me my tonic-draught, shrugged her shoulders and retired to the dressing-room.

Left alone, I took up the hand glass for which I had asked, and scanned my altered appearance mercilessly.

Yes—Josey was right. I had altered terribly. My face was thin and pale, my eyes sunken. Those straying silver threads about my temples were plainly visible. The loose black gown I had selected added to my pallor and my age. I knew I looked old and worn. It would suit my purpose.

I and Vanity had said good-bye to one another. There was no longer any reason for me to care if I looked ill or well, pretty or plain. I lay back on the white pillows. The violets Josey

had brought me were in a bowl on the little table by my side. The electric light in its rosy shades gleamed warmly over the pretty room. I looked at it and thought of all that had happened since I chose its furniture and decorations. I had been anxious, miserable, and happy. I had spent hours here racked with dread, and filled with pain . . . and a few with blissful dreams.

In the mirror opposite I could see myself now, a thin, wasted figure with melancholy eyes. I smiled bitterly. What had I in common with love—with hope?—the foolish fond joys that make up a woman's youth, and keep it youth as love decrees. Neither love nor lover would decree it for me, and the smile faded and my cheeks grew paler as I gazed. For what I saw was that ghost of the dead and beautiful that a woman cherishes and clings to with a passionate fidelity all the years of her life.

The ghost of my dead self and all the dreams I had dreamt.

I should never dream again.

.

‘Kate. . . .’ It was the voice I had longed to hear.

He stood over me, and I read in his eyes something of what I had read in Josey’s—shock surprise, distress—nothing else.

I had judged rightly; but with a smile I faced my doom.

‘I am glad to see you and to see you so well,’ I said. ‘Won’t you sit there? . . . You are my second visitor to-day.’

‘I had no idea you had been so ill,’ he said, taking the chair I had pointed out. He had forgotten to kiss me.

‘Oh! I shall soon be well again,’ I answered. ‘You can hardly be surprised that I collapsed after that ordeal.’

‘Don’t let us speak of it,’ he said. ‘I hate even to think of that night.’

‘No, we won’t speak of it,’ I answered. ‘I asked you here for a very different purpose. In a few days I shall be well enough to resume work.’

‘I shouldn’t say so—to look at you.’

‘Oh! I am of tougher fibre than you suppose. What I wish to say is something I have been

thinking of very seriously during the time that has passed.'

His eyes met mine. What I read in them was a question, and I hastened to answer it.

'Our partnership must end. I must carry on the business independently, or dispose of it altogether.'

'But, Kate, this is very strange. I thought that you . . . I mean we—'

'My dear Harry, we both made a mistake, and I think we have both recognised it. That time is over. Friends we were and are, and I hope always will be; but—nothing more.'

It cost me a great deal to say it. The effort made my voice cold and hard enough to deceive him as I meant to deceive him.

'Don't be angry with me,' I said. 'I think it was a mistake to suppose we would be any the happier for changing our friendship. And I think, Harry, you ought to give up this line of business. You have other prospects. . . . You might regret this—one day. People will only look upon it as a freak of yours. They will soon forget.'

‘But why should I give it up? What “other prospects” do you mean?’

I looked at him gravely and searchingly.

‘I think you know,’ I said. ‘When you marry, Harry, you must marry a woman young and hopeful—and innocent . . . not . . . not *me*.’

‘You don’t love me, then—or what has changed you so?’

‘I have not changed, Harry. It is only that I have recognised a truth I strove to hide from myself and from you. I am old and tired, and all the zest has gone out of life. It would be a mistake to hold you to an impulsive promise. You may have a very different position in the world one day to that which you own at present. There is hope in your future—there is none in mine.’

‘What hope do you see that you may not share if you will?’

I smiled faintly. ‘The hope of a better love than mine—a girl’s honest, unselfish, devoted love. No light gift, Harry. Better men than you might envy its possession.’

I saw the colour mount to his brow. ‘I won’t pretend to misunderstand you, Kate; but do me

the justice to believe I have never been disloyal to you.'

'I am sure of that,' I said earnestly.

'What have you heard?' he asked.

'I have seen her. But I knew long ago that she—cared.'

'She is a thousand times too good for me,' he said. 'I don't want her money. I only wish she hadn't any. Everyone will say—'

'Never mind what they say. Follow your own heart's dictates. She is better than her money, and she has proved her devotion in the face of the world.'

'It seems odd,' he said, looking searchingly at me—'that you should urge me to marry anyone else. Why, I came here to-night prepared to—'

I made a hurried gesture. 'Don't, Harry; all that is over. It couldn't be. Life looks altogether different from what it was. I have done with illusions. I only want real, true things.'

'Had I nothing that was true?'

'You did not love me, Harry. You would have sacrificed yourself, I know . . . but there is no need for sacrifice. Happiness has come to

you. Take it. Don't be too proud, don't argue with me, for I know what I am saying. I know what is best for you—for myself. Truth comes suddenly to one sometimes, like a flash, a search-light. It came so to me. You are young and she is young, and she loves you. . . . And if you don't love her now, you will some day. It can't be a very hard task. And I want to know you are both happy, for I am fond of you—both.'

'You are putting it very beautifully,' he said. 'I wonder if you mean it. I want no woman's sacrifice, Kate . . . and I never met a woman like you. It is no light matter to forego our pleasant comradeship, our friendly confidences.'

I smiled up at his earnest face. How rightly I had judged him. He was 'fond' of me—only that. But love—the one love 'of man and woman when they love their best'—that had not been his to give, nor mine to gain.

'They need not alter,' I said. 'We shall always be friends.'

'It seems like leaving you out in the cold.'

'Oh, no. A woman who has work and occupation is never lonely.'

He looked around. 'But, Kate, we have heavy debts. The expenses of this place are enormous. How can you carry it on single-handed?'

'I must do my best,' I said, with forced cheerfulness. 'You will have a rich wife, Harry, as well as a loving one—and she will not forget me.'

'By Jove, she sha'n't! nor I either. I don't mind telling you now, Kate, that I do love that little girl—awfully. You can have no idea how different she is from what I first thought her. . . . Why, all the time I lay ill and helpless she'd give up anything—balls, parties, theatres, no matter what—only to sit by my side and read and talk and cheer me. It's hours like those that show the real stuff a girl is made of.'

He rose suddenly, his head thrown back, his hands clasped behind him. He began to pace the room in the old restless fashion I knew so well.

'I'm not a coxcomb, or a fool, God knows,' he went on. 'But a man can't help seeing when a girl loves him. And to think that she might pick and choose among the best matches of the day. And she chose to spend her hours by a sick-bed in a public hospital, just to cheer and soothe a poor ne'er-do-weel like myself!'

‘Such devotion deserves a return,’ I said quietly. ‘But do not underrate yourself, Harry. You forget your birth is far superior to hers, that you may inherit a title. . . . The question of money has no more to do with your success than if you were a duke’s son.’

He shook his head. ‘I was so d——d rude to her mother,’ he said characteristically.

I laughed for the first time for many, many weeks. ‘You must hope to be forgiven,’ I said. ‘Josey will be the arbitrator between you.’

He came and sat down beside me again.

‘What a comforter you are,’ he said—a new softness and tenderness in his voice.

I was silent for a moment, battling with feelings that longed to find vent, but which I had rigorously denied outlet. When I had conquered a momentary weakness I asked the question I had determined to ask the whole evening. I asked it carelessly, with an indifference that sought to deceive him as to my real object.

‘Strange, isn’t it,’ I said, ‘how illness alters one? I seem to have lived through years . . . to have grown old and callous . . . different altogether.’

I raised one thin hand and pushed the hair up from my forehead. It was not a becoming fashion, and showed lines of anxiety and worry that had not been there a year ago. 'Josey hardly knew me,' I went on ruthlessly. 'I suppose you found me altered too?'

'I was shocked to see you,' he said unsuspectingly. 'But of course illness alters everyone. I myself looked an object in the hospital.'

(Yet that had not killed Josey's love, I thought.)

'But you mustn't take it to heart,' he went on cheerfully. 'You'll soon pull round and be the same pretty, stylish woman you were before—before all this. It was an awful time . . . awful!'

Again he rose; again commenced that restless pacing. I followed him with my eyes. A thought—odd and inconsequent—came to me at that moment—of a dog I had once seen creeping, worn and sick, to its master's feet. He had kicked it aside, and as it crept slowly away to hide itself, I saw the look in its eyes, not anger, not reproach, only a dumb wonder that its meaning had been misunderstood.

.....
'Harry,' I said presently, 'I am getting tired.

Don't think me rude if I say you must go. This is the first day I have been allowed to sit up. I'm not very strong yet.'

'By Jove! how selfish I am, I quite forgot.'

He came to my side. He stooped, and took my hands in his and kissed them. 'You look like a broken lily,' he said.

A little hysterical sob caught my throat.

'Oh! how — romantic,' I said. There had come the old look to his face, there was the old caressing intonation in his voice. He was 'fond' of me still.

With a desperate effort I called back my failing self-control.

'Come again to-morrow,' I said, 'at five o'clock.'

'For any special reason?' he inquired.

I drew my hands away. . . . I found myself looking at them vaguely. The single circlet of my wedding ring slipped loosely round that one finger.

'Yes,' I said. 'She—will be here.'

I think he said 'God bless you!' I hardly know.

The pain at my heart had grown sharp as physical torture. I watched him cross the

room. He did not look back. Perhaps he did not remember.

When the door closed, a shudder ran through me. I lay quite still, my head against the pillows.

.
'I knew you were overdoing it—I said so.'

I looked at the grey familiar figure.

'You need not scold me any more,' I said.

'I shall be very obedient—now.'

'When you've well-nigh killed yourself.'

'I take a great deal of killing, nurse.'

'Don't be too sure of that.'

'And there are worse things,' I said. 'Things that hurt—more.'

She looked at me curiously. Perhaps she thought my mind was wandering again.

'Worse things,' I repeated to myself. I felt crushed, broken, deadly tired ; yet something in me refused to die.

'Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity.'

Yet for Vanity I must live and work, and put aside for ever the best and sweetest hopes of a woman's life.

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